Transforming the Lives of Early Childhood Teachers, Autistic Children and their Families: Findings and Recommendations from an Evaluation of a Programme of Continuing Professional Development

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Abstract

In response to the exponential growth in the prevalence of autism in Ireland and 95% of all children availing of the universal free pre-school scheme, AsIAm delivered a continuing professional development (CPD) programme, to 311 adult learners. The paper reports on a multi-method evaluation of the impact of the programme on early childhood teachers' capacity to effectively include and support autistic children. The findings underline the importance of government investment in lifelong learning and the potential of a focused CPD programme to transform both participants' professional lives and the experiences they provide for the children in early learning and care services. Recommendations for future policy development are also suggested.

Keywords: Autism, autistic, inclusion, early learning and care, additional needs, impact, evaluation, continuing professional learning, lifelong learning, professional education continuum, adult education

Introduction

In accordance with the recently expressed preferences of individuals with autism in claiming their identity, the term autistic child/person is adopted in this article (Sinclair, 2013). The National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) policy advice on the importance of supporting autistic children across the education system, was welcomed by the Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton T.D. who noted that: 'education is key to giving every child an equal opportunity

in life' (Bruton, 2016). The benefits of appropriate education provision for autistic children across the life-span are well-documented and in particular the importance of high-quality early intervention to ensure children and families are supported to achieve optimal outcomes right from the start (Ring *et al.*, 2016; Government of Ireland (GoI), 2018). At a time when 1 in 65 children in Ireland receive an autism diagnosis, high-quality early intervention remains critical (NCSE, 2016; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018a). Effectively meeting the needs of autistic children requires teachers to understand the social, communication, inflexibility of thought and behaviours and sensory differences associated with autism (Egan, 2018; Feeney, 2018; Fitzgerald, 2018; Long, 2018; O'Sullivan, 2018; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018b). The Government continues to invest in early childhood education in Ireland through the introduction of the entitlement to two years of the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Scheme in 2016 and the implementation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), aimed at providing both universal and targeted supports for children with additional needs at pre-school level (Inter-Departmental Group (IDG), 2015; AIM, 2018). In January 2017 the number of children accessing the ECCE scheme surpassed the 100,000 mark for the first time, with 95% of eligible children attending a service under the ECCE scheme (Zappone, 2017). This increased uptake of ECCE places combined with the increased prevalence in children being assessed as having autism, highlighted an urgent need for increased supports for children in early learning and care (ELC) services and their families. Ensuring that early childhood teachers have the requisite knowledge(s), practices and values to confidently support autistic children and their families is therefore imperative (Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018b: Urban *et al.*, 2011).

However, while acknowledging recent government investment, Ireland has been criticised as one of the countries where less than 0.3% of gross domestic product (GDP) is spent on developing ELC provision, in comparison to other countries such as Norway and Sweden, where expenditure is 1.7% of GDP (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), 2017). This lack of investment has impacted negatively on the professionalisation of the early childhood teachers in terms of poor remuneration; lack of status/prestige; a lack of clarity in relation to a recognised knowledge base and an absence of a code of practice. The lack of clarity in relation to the professional education continuum (PEC) for early childhood teachers has led to a lack of coherence in the qualifications profile of the sector (Early Years Education Policy Working Group (EYEPU), 2017). Critically therefore early childhood teachers may not have the requisite knowledge(s), practices and values to provide effectively for

autistic children in the early years at this critical phase in children's learning and development.

AsIAm was founded in 2015 as a not-for-profit, charitable organisation to provide an information and support service to the autism community in Ireland. *AsIAm*'s aims are delineated with reference to four key headings: Educate; Empower; Advocate and Community (AsIAm, 2018). Based on its concern to educate and empower autistic children and their families, *AsIAm* developed a specific CPD initiative: *Teach Me As I Am Programme*, for early childhood teachers focused on enabling them to support autistic children and their families effectively in ELC settings. The continuing professional development (CPD) programme was delivered to 311 early childhood teachers in 2018 and this paper reports on the evaluation of the programme by the authors. The findings confirm that high-quality CPD programmes have the potential to transform both the lives of early childhood teachers and autistic children.

Background – Teach Me As I Am Programme

Initially *AsIAm* consulted directly with 246 early childhood teachers through the online closed forum 'Preschool Practitioners and Providers in Ireland', which is a forum to support early childhood educators in sharing ideas and practice. Early childhood teachers were invited to complete a survey with open and closed questions. The survey invited participants to outline their current knowledge and experience in working with autistic children and specific areas they would like to see included in the proposed CPD programme.

The survey findings confirmed that while 80% of participants had experience in working with autistic children, 60% had never accessed CPD related to autism, as noted by one participant: 'I honestly don't know anything about autism. I would love to be able to understand more about the condition'. Participants identified a number of key areas where they required support in providing appropriately for autistic children, which included, communication; social skills; sensory processing; behaviour management and working with parents. Early childhood teachers frequently referred to requiring support in addressing children's anxiety, which they often observed culminated in disturbing incidents: 'how to teach children the skills they need to prevent/subside the impulsiveness of their actions when they get very agitated and frustrated, which can sometimes lead to violent outbursts'.

Parents were also consulted in relation to the proposed programme content through a support forum for parents of autistic children: 'Autism Mamaí' (Autism Mamaí, 2018). Of the 103 parents who participated, 45% responded that they felt very supported in their partnership with their child's early childhood teacher, 34% felt somewhat supported and 20% reported feeling unsupported. The most prevalent theme identified by parents in relation to supporting their role in their children's early education experiences was the need to develop better communication: 'more feedback from teachers and SNAs (Special Needs Assistants). It's scary having a non-verbal child and always wanting to know about their day' and 'I feel like full details of a child's day in preschool should be made clearer i.e. what activities and learning took place'. Parents consistently highlighted the need for early childhood teachers to have the requisite knowledge(s); understanding and skills to support both their children and themselves: 'trained personnel in mainstream preschools' and 'better trained staff".

Teach Me As I Am Programme: Overview, Delivery and Approach

Based on the responses of early childhood teachers, parents and research-based practice in providing for autistic children (Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018b;), the aims, objectives and content of the programme were designed and developed by *AsIAm*. The primary aim of the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* was to develop knowledge(s), practices and values to support early childhood teachers in cultivating inclusive environments for autistic children. Knowledge(s), practices and values have explicit meanings and purposes (Urban, Robson and Scacchi, 2017). Knowledge is co-constructed between all involved in the ELC system including children, families, communities, early childhood teachers and researchers; knowledge is always emerging in the complex and ever-changing milieu of the ELC context and is represented in the plural to reflect the nature of knowledge as diverse. Practices are critically reflected on, are purposeful and are not to be equated with 'skills', while underpinning values require articulation and go beyond demonstrated attitudes. Nine programme learning outcomes were identified and are detailed in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Teach Me As I Am Programme Learning Outcomes

1.	Explore the role and responsibilities of the early childhood teacher in relation to inclusion.
2.	Examine and explore potential learning opportunities in the early childhood setting in relation to accommodating and celebrating diversity.
3.	Understand the diagnostic criteria and assessment route for autism.
4.	Understand the different characteristics, strengths and differences autism may present.
5.	Explore services available for children during and post diagnosis
6.	Explore the rights of children with diverse needs in relation to personal autonomy; participation; communication and decision-making.
7.	Relate effectively and appropriately to children with diverse needs.
8.	Explore sensory processing differences and experiences, and how to effectively support these in the early childhood setting.
9	Maintain appropriate and supportive relationships with children, parents, primary carers, and other members of the child's team.

Programme content was designed specifically to ensure both the aims and the objectives of the programme could be achieved and focused on understanding autism; communication methods and techniques; sensory processing; social skills; positive relationships and parental partnership. Specifically the programme maintained a focus on enabling participants to acquire the knowledge(s), practices and values necessary to understand the implications of the differences associated with autism for children's learning and development in the early years as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Implications of the Differences Associated with Autism for Children's Learning and Development

Differences Associated with Autism	Implications of these Differences for Children's Learning and Development
Differences in Social Interaction:	• Literal thinkers • Confused by the rules that govern social behaviour • Require direct teaching in social skills • Necessary to structure opportunities for the child to use social skills in different situations • Awareness of the difficulties for the child inherent in less structured situations such as break and lunchtime, and in transition between lessons.
Differences in Language and Communication:	• The child needs support in understanding the purpose and value of communication • Attention needs to be directed to teaching the social aspects of language e.g. turn-taking. • Direct teaching of gestures, facial expression, vocal intonation and body language • Use of visual material and/signing to support and facilitate the child's communicative initiations and responses • Providing precise instructions for the child to follow.
Differences in Flexibility of Thought and Behaviour	The child must be helped to cope with new and varying activities Pre-empting the child's anxiety, which results from being presented with unstructured or unfamiliar situations without prior warning/explanation • Devising and implementing a structured play-programme.
Differences in Sensory Responsivity	• Adjustments must be made to the classroom to address the child's under-sensitivity/over-sensitivity to noise, smell, taste, light, touch or movement • Eliciting relevant information regarding the child's eating, drinking and sleeping irregularities • Structuring the classroom environment to reduce distractions • Securing the child's attention prior to issuing instructions/ engaging in conversation • Avoiding insisting on eye-contact • Provision of structures which assist the child in understanding the duration of tasks • Making the links between different tasks clear to the child • Direct teaching of target skills with directedness and clarity.

The responses from early childhood teachers and parents suggested that there was a need to allow participants time to embed knowledge(s), practices and values in children's experiences. Therefore, it was decided that a two-day programme would allow learners to embed new learning more effectively. This programme was delivered nationally in 2018 in the sixteen locations detailed in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Schedule of Teach Me As I Am Programme Delivery

Location	Day One	Day Two
Dublin North	12th February	2nd May
Galway	15th February	3rd May
Dublin South	19th February	8th May
Kerry	22nd February	10th May
Mayo	8th March	24th May
Cavan	12th March	28th May
Clare	15th March	31st May
Westmeath	21st March	6th June
Waterford	23rd March	8th June
Cork (Glanmire)	4th April	16th May
Kildare	9th April	11th June
Kilkenny	12th April	13th June
Meath	16th April	21st May
Donegal	19th April	20th June
Cork City	25th April	17th May
Limerick	26th April	28th June

A two-day programme was designed with Day One of the programme focused on addressing the areas that early childhood teachers had suggested should be included in the programme. In order to allow the learning from Day One to embed in practice, Day One was followed by a two-month period. Believing that reflective practice allows for critical reflection on practices, and deepens learning, the concept of reflective practice (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2009; Bonfield and Horgan, 2016; Tynan, 2018) was

central to Day Two, which incorporated discussion with peers; interrogation of group case-studies and class discussions on how the learning from Day One was applied to practice in ELC services.

Based on the work of Knowles (1980; 1984), a delivery approach was adopted that considered the characteristics of adult learners and in particular the specific context of early childhood teachers. Activities focused on enabling participants to be self-directed in their learning; encouraging participants to utilise their experience as a resource for learning; focusing on ELC contexts in cultivating readiness for learning; harnessing the orientation to learning through employing case-studies grounded in practice and consolidating the internal motivation to learn. In addition, and acknowledging the similarities between andragogy and pedagogy, the programme drew on current learning theories related to motivation, cognitive psychology and neuroscience through locating content within participants' sphere of experience in a motivating and engaging manner; eliciting and building on previous learning and providing multi-modal representations of concepts (Ring *et al.*, 2018).

Evaluation Methodology

In order to address the complexity of evaluating programmes of CPD, a multi-method approach was used to evaluate the impact of the programme and included semi-structured interviews, exploring and telling and word cloud generation using Mentimeter and questionnaires (Hein, 2018; Mentimeter, 2018; Mukherji and Albon, 2018; Ring and O'Sullivan, 2018). All data collection instruments were piloted prior to the commencing the evaluation and were adjusted accordingly. Ethical approval was received through Mary Immaculate College's (Limerick) ethical approval process.

A pre- and post- programme questionnaire designed to capture participants' attitudes, beliefs, opinions, values, experiences and behaviour in addition to demographics and relevant background information was distributed to participants. The post-programme questionnaire focused on establishing the impact of the CPD programme on participants' knowledge(s); practices and values vis-à-vis the inclusion of autistic children (Urban *et al.*, 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018). Both questionnaires included a combination of forced-choice questions and open-ended questions and generated both qualitative and quantitative data. In order to optimise response rate, participants were invited to complete the questionnaires at the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* sessions in hard-copy format and data subsequently inputted by the programme deliverer on the SurveyMonkey® platform (SurveyMonkey Inc., 2018).

Participants at both *Teach Me As I Am Programme* sessions were asked to record their understanding of providing for autistic children in the early childhood settings, using Mentimeter and word clouds were generated through the software (Mentimeter 2018). The word clouds at Figure 1 and 2 below provide data from one of the sixteen locations in which the programme was delivered. The data summarises participants' understanding of providing for autistic children in early childhood settings, pre- and post- participation in the *Teach Me As I Am Programme*

**Figure 1. Pre-programme Word Cloud from Participants at the Blue Location[1]**

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1   'Nuralogical' in Figure 1 can be equated with 'neurological'.

Figure 2. Post-programme Word Cloud from Participants at the Blue Location

Six early childhood teachers in two early childhood settings, who had completed the Teach Me As I Am Programme, were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews related to their experience of the programme, which were recorded using a voice-recording device. Following transcription, Quirkos was used to support the data analysis (Quirkos, 2017). Figure 3 provides a visual representation of the interview-coding process from Quirkos.

Figure 3. Interview Coding Process (Quirkos 2017)
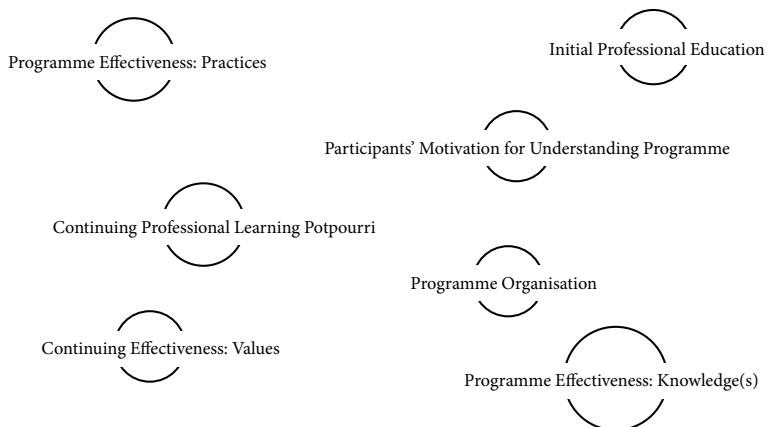
Exploring and telling was used to explore autistic children's experience in the ELC setting (Ring and O'Sullivan, 2018). The process utilises auto-photography

to capture how the child is experiencing the ELC service. In effect the child is invited to become a co-researcher in the evaluation. Following securing of parental consent and child assent, each child wore a small portable camera during activities in the setting. Video-data were uploaded to the Observer XT® software and analysed through coding of the video-data using an emergent approach to initially identify the main concepts evident in the data (Noldus 2018). During the subsequent phase of analysis, these codes were clustered to reflect broader emerging themes. The methods in Table 4 were adopted to support the trustworthiness of the research process and findings.

Table 4. Methods Adopted in Establishing the Trustworthiness of the Research Process and Findings

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Internal Validity and Credibility	Triangulation of data sources and collection methods Extracts from data used in reporting Photographic evidence (video-stills) Attention to researcher-effect
External Validity and Transferability	Rich description of research context, research participants and process of data collection and analysis
Reliability and Dependability	Methodological Triangulation
Objectivity and Confirmability	Application of all of the above techniques in a systematic and consistent manner

Evaluation Findings and Discussion

The findings of the evaluation yielded a range of significant findings in terms of the impact of the programme on participants and children and future directions in terms of addressing the lack of coherence in the qualifications' profile of the ELC sector. The pre-programme questionnaire was disseminated to 311 participants, yielding a response rate of 91%. The post-programme questionnaire was distributed to the 272 participants, providing a response rate of 95%. Not all participants on Day One or Day Two completed all questions, which has created a disparity in frequency of responses evident in a number of Tables. Early childhood teachers participating in the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* were working across community, private settings and primary schools as summarised in Table 5.

Table 5. Profile of Teach Me As I Am Programme Participants' Settings

Setting Type	Frequency	%
Community-based Settings	91	32.73%
Private Settings	156	56.12%
Settings located in Primary Schools	31	11.15%
Total	278	100%

An overview of the five main themes that emerged from the composite analysis of the data is presented in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Overview of Themes Emerging from the Composite Data-Analysis
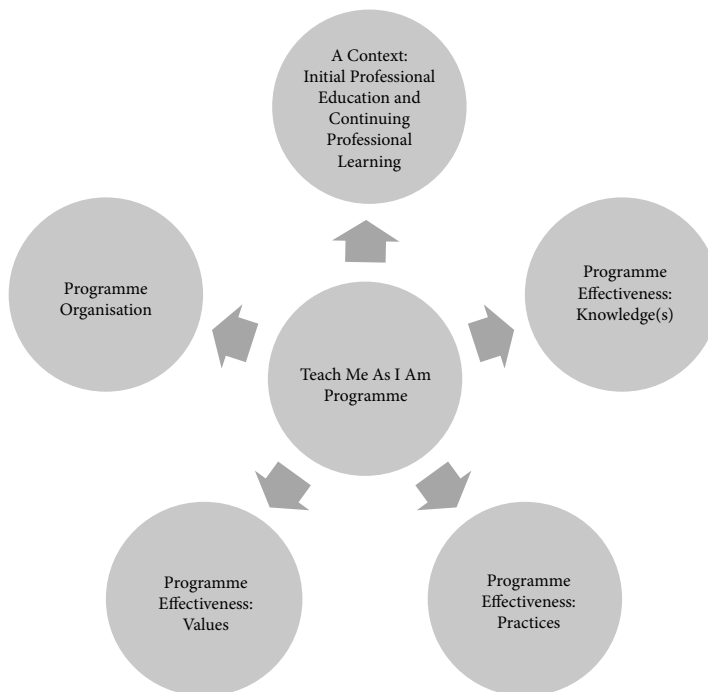
Each theme identified is presented and discussed below. In reporting the findings, the two settings who participated in the semi-structured interviews and exploring and telling are referred to as Aisling (translates from the Irish as 'dream') and Réalt (translates from the Irish as 'star') and participants as A1; A2; A3 and R1; R2: R3. The two children who participated in the research are referred to as Kate (Aisling) and Jane (Réalt).

A Context: Initial Professional Education and Continuing Professional Learning

Table 6 below provides an overview of 277 participants' qualifications in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (2018), which reflects the variety of qualifications of early childhood teachers nationally. Four participants elected not to answer the question on qualifications.

Table 6. Qualifications of Participants at Pre-Programme Phase

Qualification Level	Frequency	%
Level 5	46	16.6%
Level 6	118	42.6%
Level 7	33	11.9%
Level 8	73	26.4%
Level 9	7	2.5%
Total	277	100%

The findings are consistent with the annual national survey on the ELC sector, which identifies 63% cent of the early years workforce as having a qualifications at a Level 6 Certificate or above (Pobal, 2017). This diversity in staff qualifications at Initial Professional Education (IPE) level also presents challenges in terms of ensuring that all staff working with autistic children have the requisite knowledge(s); practices and values to provide effectively for children in the early years (Urban *et al.* 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018b). Participants in the research frequently commented that autism was a topic rarely discussed in detail during IPE programmes. While participants acknowledged that a number of modules accessed during their IPE experience had some application in preparing them to work with autistic children, the need for a greater focus on the application of theory to practice was consistently referred to as noted by the early childhood teacher in Réalt '*I think looking back with the amount that I am seeing, I think that I could have done a lot more learning about it in college* '(R2).

The extent to which participants reported previously engaging in CPD activities focused on inclusion and autism is provided in Table 7.

Table 7. Participants' Participation in Continuing Professional Learning in the Areas of Inclusion and Autism Prior to Commencing the Teach Me As I Am Programme

Type of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)	Participants who had Undertaken CPD %	Participants who had not Undertaken CPD %
CPD in the Area of Inclusion	53.7%	46.3%
CPD in the Area of Autism	26.1%	73.9%

Over half of participants reported undertaking CPD in the area of inclusion, however less than 30% of respondents reported undertaking CPD activities related to autism.

Programme Effectiveness: Knowledge(s)

Participants were invited to rate their overall satisfaction with the programme on a five-point scale ranging from 'very dissatisfied' to 'very satisfied'. As illustrated in Table 8, overall satisfaction levels with the programme were high with 11.2% reporting that they were 'satisfied' with the programme and 88.8% reporting that they were 'very satisfied' with the programme.

Table 8. Participants' Overall Satisfaction with the Teach Me As I Am Programme

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Overall Satisfaction	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
Overall Satisfaction	29	11.2%	230	88.8%		259

Post-programme questionnaires indicated a clear increase in early childhood teachers' knowledge, confidence and expertise in providing for children with autism. All participants in the survey were either 'satisfied 'or 'very satisfied'

with the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* content as summarised in Table 9 and encapsulated in the words of a participant who noted that the programme was 'very informative, given great knowledge and advice for not only supporting the child but also supporting parents'.

Specific reference was made by participants to the breadth and depth of the knowledge; the focus on empathy; a child-led concept of pedagogy and curriculum; the role of the environment for autistic children; the critical importance of building relationships with parents and the affirmation of existing practice in the setting.

Table 9. Participants' Satisfaction with the Content of the Teach Me As I am Programme

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Overall Satisfaction	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
Overall Satisfaction	32	12.4%	227	87.6%		259

As one questionnaire participant noted: 'the programme covered a wide range of topics in great depth. I picked up far more information at this training than any other I've been to'. Overall, post-programme questionnaire results indicate that educators have 'a better understanding of the characteristics associated with autism'. Critically participants noted that the programme supported them in developing empathy for the autistic child: 'especially after doing the course…I've noticed you kind of have to really put your feet in their shoes, that was one of the main things for me, was putting myself in the child's shoes and just stepping back, observing and just being like, having that empathy for the child' (A1). Frequent reference was made to the programme highlighting the child-centred focused advocated by *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2009) as summarised by the settings who participated in the interviews: 'I think that each child or even adult with autism, everyone is unique so each of the autism interventions has to be different for each

individual' (R1); 'when you've met one child with autism, you've met one child with autism' (A1). This was further captured by an early childhood teacher in Réalt who noted that: 'to teach Johnny, you've got to know Johnny, you've got to know their likes, where they are in life, the key areas of their development and provide then with a caring and friendly environment. That's important to them and we're the adults do we've got to change and adapt to their needs rather than expecting them to change and adapt to everyday life in play school' (R3).

The word clouds in Figure 5 and 6 below demonstrate participants' shift in a concept of autism as a deficit-model to a strengths-based, individualised one.

Figure 5. Pre-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location C

Figure 6. Post-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location C2

This conceptual shift was evident in a range of responses provided by questionnaire participants: 'it made me think differently about children with autism, changing views equals changing practices. Giving me a different view, helped me help that child to learn in a way they are comfortable'. Similarly, another noted her misunderstanding in relation to a child presenting with autism: 'I can now realise that what I thought as maybe the child not trying to learn or concentrate, was all wrong and that they are trying so hard and need to be understood and that is our job'.

The concept of a child-led approach is captured in the video-stills below from Réalt, where Jane was provided with a prepared environment that enabled her to select to play with the jigsaw independently based on her current interest in both colours and the letters of the alphabet. The early childhood teacher was observed to support Jane and her two peers who joined in the activity, which impacted positively on Jane's engagement and social interaction.

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2   In Figure 6 'sencory' may be equated with 'sensory'; 'opportuni' may be equated with 'opportunities' and 'wopportunities' may be equated with 'opportunities.

Figure 7. A Child-Led Approach

Following engagement with the programme, early childhood teachers frequently referred to the importance of creating a calm, predictable and structured physical environment in the setting as captured by participants during the semi-structured interviews: 'and see what might be irritating them, why they're a little but upset today coming in or do you know, it could be the environment, I suppose the environment is a big thing that I kind of notice now' (A3); 'am, I notice as well she loves to work, she really focuses on her work when she's in a quiet environment' (A1); 'looking at the environment, over-stimulating sounds that we might not have picked up on' (R2) and 'the fridge is buzzing, the light is flickering its kind of pointed out what we need to look, combe back to basics' (R3). Positive relationships between parents and the ELC service play a pivotal role in a child's wellbeing, identity formation and sense of belonging (Daly *et al.* 2016; O'Byrne 2018) and participants affirmed that the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* had supported them in providing for the autistic child and their parents.

Programme Effectiveness: Practices

Practices are concerned with the application of knowledge to practice and is therefore inextricably linked with knowledge(s). In terms of application to practice, the majority of participants were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the programme. As detailed in Table 10 below.

Table 10. Participants' Satisfaction with the Application of the Teach Me As I am Programme to Practice

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Overall Satisfaction	0	0%	0	0%	1	.4%

	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Overall Satisfaction	49	18.9%	209	80.7%	259

Qualitative responses to the survey suggest that participants particularly valued the emphasis on practical strategies in the programme. As summarised by one of the questionnaire participants: 'this programme has been the best most practical and realistic training I have ever had' and that 'the practical tools given were [so] beneficial', while others, as referred to previously, were encouraged by the affirmation that the current strategies they were using were beneficial and meaningful.

Programme Effectiveness: Values

Values are reflected in the pedagogy early childhood teachers adopt and are inextricably linked to theoretical perspectives about how children learn and develop and beliefs and about education (Jones and Shelton, 2011). A respect for the way children with autism think and learn should lie at the heart of beliefs about the autism and be aligned with *Early Childhood Care and Education National Inclusion Charter* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), 2016) summarised below.

Figure 8. Principles of the Early Childhood Care and Education National Inclusion Charter (DCYA, 2016)
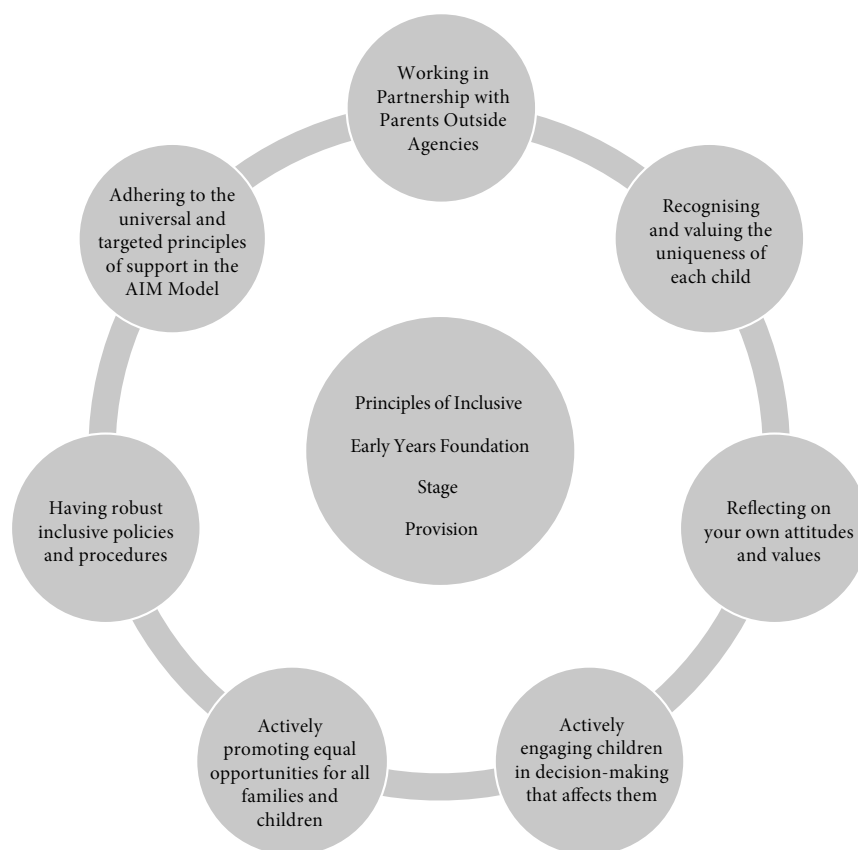
Questionnaire participants were asked to give an overall indication as to how well they felt the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* prepared them to work with an autistic child in the future. As captured in Table 11, participants felt that the programme either prepared them 'well' or 'very well' to meet the needs of an autistic child. Crucially, these responses indicate a notable change from the responses to the pre-programme survey where participants reported being ill-equipped to meet the learning and developmental needs of autistic children in the early years.

Table 11. Participants' Perspectives on how the Teach Me As I Am Programme Prepared them for Providing for an Autistic Child in the Early Childhood Setting

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Overall Satisfaction	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%		
Overall Satisfaction	58	22.5%	200	77.5%		258

The transformation from equating the autistic child with a series of 'behaviour' challenges to understanding the concept of difference and being able to respond to each child's unique differences is captured in the pre- and post- programme word clouds from Location D.

Figure 9. Pre-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location D

Figure 10. Post-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location D[3]

A key element that emerged was participants' commitment to observation, planning and in including children's voices through actively listening to children, as encapsulated by an early childhood educator at Réalt: 'in our setting we would use observation and documentation of little stories or whatever has happened that day, like little things that we notice and we have the little scrapbook as well that we send home at the end of every month' (R2). The importance of observation and planning in providing effectively for autistic children is consistently emphasised in research (Ring, 2018; Ryan, 2018; Dunleavy-Lavin, Heaney and Skehill, 2018). Participants frequently articulated a concern to provide for children's well-being and to support children in achieving their full potential.

Programme Organisation
All participants in the questionnaire reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the tutor support offered during the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* as summarised in Table 12.

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3   In Figure 10 'sensoru' may be equated with 'sensory'

Table 12. Participants' Satisfaction with Programme Support

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Overall Satisfaction	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%

	Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	
Overall Satisfaction	11	4.2%	248	95.8%	259

In the qualitative responses, participants repeatedly made reference to the tutor's '*passion and knowledge*'. The tutor was described as 'excellent' and 'knowledgeable' and as someone who helped me to understand better from the child's perspective how chaotic the world is'. These high satisfaction levels were echoed by interview participants and reference was frequently made to the tutor's own experience of having autism, as summarised by an early childhood teacher at Aisling: 'I suppose (the tutor) was just amazing the way she spoke about it and she had Asperger's, well that side of the spectrum and her daughter has it and it's just amazing to see that how great a child can do, like brilliantly' (A1).

Participants were also asked to share any ideas which they had in relation to improving the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* in the future. Consistent with the findings above, the majority of participants reported that they would not change anything about the programme, for example: 'not sure the programme needs improving as I really enjoyed it!'. A number of participants indicated that having a workbook or handouts would be useful in bringing their new learning back to their settings.

There were mixed views with regard to the timing of the sessions with some participants indicating a preference for less time between the two CPD days, while others felt that more time between the two days would have given more time to try out newly acquired strategies and receive more feedback. Consistent with broader issues relating to non-contact time in ELC services, many respondents' articulated the challenges experienced around attending CPD activities and sourcing relief staff for their services.

Many respondents referred to programme duration and indicated a preference for a longer programme which would allow for more extensive learning in the area of autism. Some respondents expressed a preference that the *Teach Me As I Am Programme* would be developed as an accredited programme at Level 5, 6 or 7. One respondent commented, for example: 'give us more of it, develop it make it into an accredited level 5, 6, 7, 8. This is definitely the way I would like to see it going'. Many respondents felt that it would be beneficial to 'provide the training programme to parents as well'. Here respondents are referring to the programmes on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) 2018.

The interactive way the programme was delivered was particularly referred to and noted by participants as significant. The open and collaborative approach encouraged by the tutor motivated participants to consider autism in a novel and encouraging light: 'the interactive and open approach promoted autism and difference in such a positive way'. Participating early childhood teachers enjoyed receiving feedback and interacting with 'other class members', noting that 'the shared learning was very good'. Participants reported that content was presented in a realistic fashion, which greatly enhanced overall engagement with programme content: 'the trainer's passion and knowledge coincided with practical tools which will enhance understanding amongst us all'. Similarly, another noted how the tutor's in-depth knowledge of autism supported the practical advice given: 'knowledgeable trainer who was able to give very practical real-life ways of engaging with children and families of children who have autism'.

Conclusion

The limited time-frame for the research precluded the isolation of complexities such as individual early childhood teachers' prior experiences and expertise; capability; personal and professional biographies; contextual factors; emotional and psychological dimensions and the heterogeneous needs of children (Day and Sachs, 2004; Guskey, 2009). While acknowledging the limitations of the research and the need for more in-depth field-work to further explore impact on practice in the ELC services involved, nonetheless the findings are significant for both early childhood and adult education. The high levels of satisfaction with the *Teach Me as I Am* programme are significant and merit discussion, specifically as they relate to the current melange of qualifications in the ELC sector and the absence of a coherent qualifications and CPD framework; the critical importance of early childhood teachers having the

requisite knowledge(s); practices and values to support inclusion effectively for children in the early years and the potential of high-quality adult-learning CPD programmes, that adopt innovative and engaging andragogy.

There has been a concerted government commitment to improving initial training and CPD for all early childhood staff, which was once again articulated in the *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families* 2019–2018 (GoI 2018), however the absence of a coherent qualifications structure and CPD infrastructure is a cause for concern and requires addressing urgently. Creating inclusive learning environments where diversity is the norm is complex and it is therefore important that teachers are prepared to provide for the engagement and achievement of all children (Ring and O'Sullivan, 2019). The importance of building professional knowledge and confidence in relation to providing effectively for autistic children is consistently highlighted in the literature (Daly *et al.*, 2016; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018b). The research findings demonstrate that the *Teach Me As I Am* programme provided early childhood teachers with a range of appropriate knowledge(s), practices and values to provide for autistic children. Participants' specifically referred to the expertise of the tutor; the innovative andragogy employed which created opportunities to explore the concept of autism in meaningful and practice-based contexts and the emphasis on cultivating positive relationships with parents as contributing to the overall effectiveness of the programme.

Continuing professional development programmes therefore that are planned in collaboration with early childhood teachers, provide time for embedding of practice and utilise effective andragogy can contribute significantly to the professionalisation of the ELC profession. The positive findings from this research can be harnessed as a blue-print with which to interrogate the CPD infrastructure for the ELC sector recently announced by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, TD (Zappone, 2018). Additionally, these findings support the potentially radical impact of effective andragogy and most importantly highlight the role of lifelong learning in transforming the lives of early childhood teachers, autistic children and their families.

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