

**Centre for Early-Childhood Research at Mary  
Immaculate College**

**(CERAMIC)**

**Limerick.**



**An Evaluation of Teach Me As I Am Early Years  
Programme**

*'this programme is the epitome of "walk a mile in my shoes"... It turns all theory around ... and affords us a new insight into how we can support and adapt to the needs of a child with autism' – Participant's Observation*

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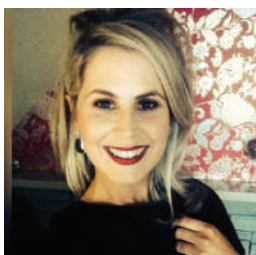
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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research is timely in view of the recent publication of *First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* (Government of Ireland 2018a), and in particular the strategy's affirmation of the centrality of continuing professional development in providing high-quality early learning and care experiences for all children. The findings of this research affirm the principles articulated in *First Five* and highlight the transformative potential of continuing professional development programmes, which are firmly embedded in research, delivered through a practice-focused lens and employ motivating instructional strategies.

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Finally a word of thanks to Katelynn Ferris, whose words and wisdom can be found in the Foreword to this report.



# FOREWORD

*Some people with autism can't speak and I want to say these words for them. I love having autism and I want people to learn about it.*

*My name is Katelynn and I have autism. To me autism means that you can find things harder than other people and sometimes you can be better at some things than other people. So in other words, I think differently. My Mum found out I had autism when I was nearly two years old.*

*In first years of pre-school, it was a preschool where autistic children go to. In preschool it was a little bit noisy and I found things hard to learn. Because I was so scared, I stopped talking for three years. I started speaking again in senior infants and it made me more comfortable.*

*Some people ask me why I shake my hands or jump up and down. That's called 'stimming'. 'Stimming' makes me feel better. Now I am in second class and I find things a little bit easier. Some things are a little bit hard but I know I can ask for help. I want people to understand that I am a little bit different and that's a good thing. If we were all the same, the world would be so boring. Some people with autism can't speak and I want to say these words for them. I love having autism and I want people to learn about it.*

Katelynn Ferris



# GLOSSARY AND TERMINOLOGY

## GLOSSARY

APA	American Psychiatric Association
ASD	Autism Spectrum Difference
BA	Bachelor of Arts
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CPL	Continuing Professional Learning
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DES	Department of Education and Skills
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs
EYEPU	Early Years Education Policy Working Group
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
IPE	Initial Professional Education
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
LINC	Leadership for INCLUSION in the Early Years Programme
MCA	Middletown Centre for Autism
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
PEC	Professional Education Continuum
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
UN	United Nations

## GLOSSARY


Early Childhood Settings	Settings providing early education and care to children prior to commencing primary school.
Early Childhood Teachers	Staff working in settings providing early education and care to children prior to commencing primary school.



### Introduction

Mary Immaculate College (MIC) is an autonomous third-level college, established in 1898 and academically linked to the University of Limerick. The College offers undergraduate and post-graduate degrees in Education and the Arts and has expanded significantly in recent years, both in terms of student numbers and of programme provision, which now spans early childhood education and care (ECEC), primary and post-primary levels. The College provides an initial teacher education (ITE) programme for 40% of primary teachers in Ireland. In order to meet the demands for a graduate-led workforce to provide quality early childhood education in Ireland, a four-year Bachelor of Arts in Early Childhood Care and Education (BA ECCE) was established at MIC in 2003. This programme is now one of the largest initial professional education (IPE) early childhood education programmes in the country. Post-primary ITE is provided at MIC's Thurles campus. A range of programmes, from Level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) 2016), up to and including Level 10 (Doctoral level) programmes are also available at MIC. More recently MIC, together with its partners Early Childhood Ireland and Maynooth University-Froebel Department of Primary and Early Education led the Higher Education Consortium, which was awarded €5.5 million to develop the *Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme (LINC Consortium, 2016-2018)*.

The College has a long tradition as a centre of excellence in the Irish and global education landscape with its graduates much sought after and valued. This excellence is underpinned by a commitment to engaging in research-informed teaching, which in turn has the potential to impact on policy and practice in education. In this context, the Centre for Early-childhood Research at Mary Immaculate College (CERAMIC), Limerick has an exceptional track record in conducting research in the area of early childhood education and inclusion. A team of researchers from CERAMIC at MIC in collaboration with Fiona Ferris, AsIAm was invited to conduct an evaluation of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* in the period from January 2018 to November 2018. While the scale and the time



frame of the evaluation are limited, nonetheless the evaluation has generated findings that will be of interest to all those concerned with providing high-quality and inclusive early childhood learning and care experiences for all children both at policy and practice levels. Specifically the research findings are opportune in the context of the recent launch of *First Five: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028* [to be referred to as *First Five Strategy* throughout the evaluation], which specifically identifies the improvement of initial training and continuing professional development (CPD) for all early childhood staff as a strategic action (Government of Ireland (GoI) 2018a)

### **Continuing Professional Learning or Continuing Professional Development?**

Continuing professional development is concerned with learning related to professional practice, which is continuous and leads to qualitative shifts in professionalism throughout a person's career (Fraser et al. 2007, p. 157; Lawlor 2014). Lawlor observes that the term, 'continuing professional learning' (CPL) seeks to distinguish between the process of learning and development. Concurring with Lawlor, the authors suggest that CPD can take many forms and indicate engagement at a variety of levels, in a range of contexts, as a solo participant or as a member of a group, For the purposes of this research therefore, the term CPD is used, unless CPL is specifically referred to by a research participant or referenced in the literature. The data-collection instruments included in the Appendices, use both terms, which are often used interchangeably in the context of early learning and care (ELC). The research was focused however on establishing whether qualitative shifts in participants' professionalism could be identified from participation in the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*.

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## **An Evaluation of the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme**

The *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* was developed by AsIAM to provide an introduction to autism for early childhood teachers. While we acknowledge the wide range of terminology used to describe those professionals who work with young children and in particular the term ‘ELC practitioners’, which is used in the First Five Strategy (Gol 2018a), in this report we are using the term ‘early childhood teacher’. The use of the term ‘early childhood teacher’ is based on John Dewey’s concept of the ‘teacher’ as an interpreter and guide as the child re-enacts, rediscovers and reconstructs his/her experience on a daily basis together with the authors’ belief that this term best describes the role of all of those who work with children in ELC services (Camp Mayhew and Camp Edwards, 1936). We understand also that terminology is linked to issues in relation to the professionalisation of the sector, which while related to this research, remains outside its remit.

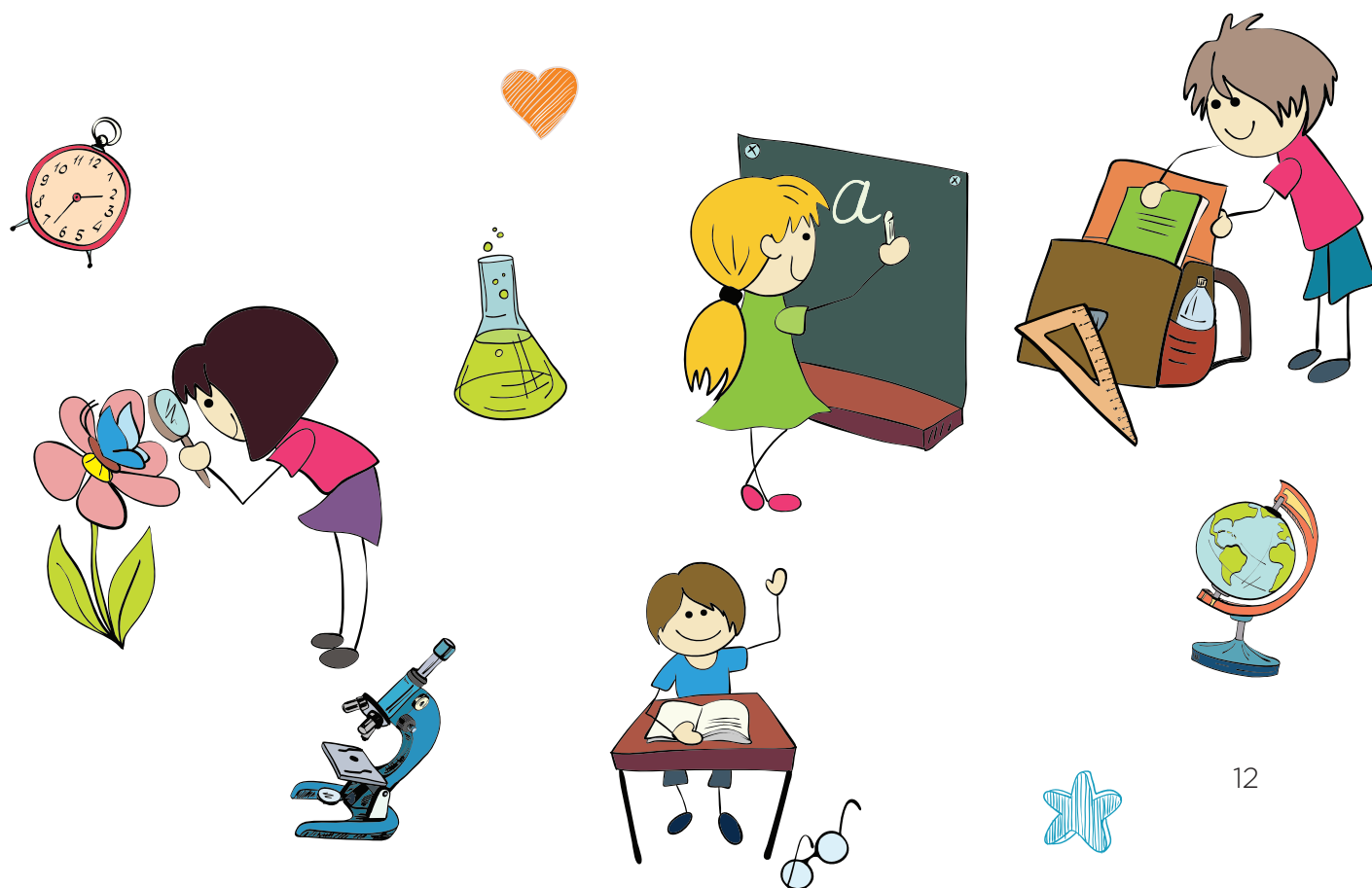
The timeliness of both the *Teach me As I Am Early Years Programme* and this evaluation is significant in the Irish context in view of the evolving *Access and Inclusion Model* (AIM) initiated in 2015 (Inter-Departmental Group 2015; AIM 2018) and the early years continuing professional development (CPD) infrastructure recently announced by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Katherine Zappone, TD, in addition to the welcome focus on CPD in the recent *First Five Strategy* (Zappone 2018; Gol 2018a).

An overview of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* is provided in the next Chapter. Located in the existing Irish and global policy context, the Literature Review in Chapter Three, examines the role of CPD in equipping early childhood teachers to effectively provide for autistic children in early childhood settings. The multi-method approach comprising pre- and post-questionnaires; word cloud generation; semi-structured interviews and exploring and telling is described in Chapter Four. Chapter Five details the findings of the evaluation and Chapter Six identifies the implications of the evaluation for future policy and practice.

## Autism Spectrum Disorder or Autism Spectrum Difference?

Prior to the publication of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association (APA) 2013), autism or autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) was associated with a triad of impairments in social interaction, patterns of communication and flexibility of thought and behaviour (Ring, McKenna and Wall 2015). The current classification system also encompasses these areas and includes a further dimension related to a child's hyper/hypo reactivity to sensory input or displaying a particular interest in sensory-related aspects of the environment (Feeney 2018). The concept of 'impairment' or 'disorder' is contested by individuals with autism, parents/carers and academics, who advocate for a concept of autism that focuses on acknowledging, understanding, accommodating and celebrating 'difference' (Grandin, 1995; Greene, 2006; Ring, Daly and Wall, 2018). Both the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme and the evaluation adopt a position of 'difference' and reject the terminology of 'impairment' and 'disorder'.

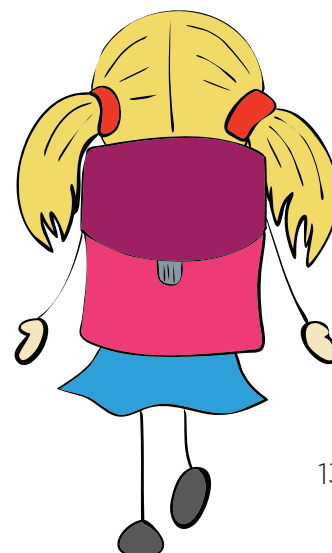
The term autism is used throughout the report and in accordance with the expressed preferences of individuals with autism in claiming their identity, the term autistic child/person is adopted (Sinclair 2013).



### Introduction

AsIAM is a not-for-profit, charitable organisation founded in 2015 to provide an information and support service to the autism community in Ireland. AsIAM.ie sums up its aims with reference to four key headings: Educate; Empower; Advocate and Community (AsIAM 2018). Through increasing and improving accessibility of information, AsIAM aims to equip people in the autism community with a better understanding of what it means to be an autistic person. It also hopes to effectively communicate thoughts and concerns of those within the autism community to those working with autistic individuals and the general public, working towards a more informed and understanding society. AsIAM passionately believes in providing autistic individuals with the tools to reach their potential, through developing projects and campaigns based on the issues brought forward by its users. Acting as a representative for its users within the autism community in Ireland, AsIAM aims to highlight and communicate areas of concern raised to develop public awareness and policy campaigns surrounding these issues. AsIAM endeavours to provide a safe and pleasant space for the autism community to share experiences, concerns and ideas with others having similar experiences, in the hope of breaking down the geographical and social barriers contributing to isolation within the autism community.

In this Chapter, the rationale for the development of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* will be discussed; the process of developing the programme content, aims and learning outcomes will be summarised and the organisation and schedule of programme delivery provided.





## Context and Rationale for the Development of the *Teach Me As I A Early Years Programme*

In 2016, the Minister for Education and Skills Richard Bruton TD welcomed the publication of the National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) policy advice on supporting autistic children in schools (Bruton 2016). This event highlighted the reported number of autistic children in the education system to be 1 in 65, with 86% of children with an autism diagnosis receiving their education in a mainstream class or a class located in a mainstream school. The presumption in favour of inclusion in the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004*, combined with government commitment to investing in inclusion has led to an increase in the number of children with autism attending mainstream primary and post-primary schools (Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). 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) launched the same year (AIM 2018) provide a similar and welcome impetus for embedding inclusion in early learning and care (ELC) services.


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). The 95% uptake of ECCE places combined with the increased prevalence in children being assessed as having autism, highlighted a clear need for increased supports for children in ELC settings and their families. Critically, the early childhood teachers, educating and caring for children, required support in relation to the knowledge(s), practices and values central to providing high-quality ELC for autistic children (Urban et al. 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018).

Conscious that currently the components of the professional education continuum (PEC) for early childhood teachers in Ireland are in the initial stages of development (Early Years Education Policy Working Group (EYEPW) 2017), AsIAM was concerned that early childhood teachers may not have accessed modules related to providing high-quality ELC for autistic children during initial professional education (IPE) or continuing professional development (CPD) programmes.

AsIAm responded to this emerging need through the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme. In developing the programme content, AsIAm initially consulted directly with 246 early childhood teachers to identify areas they would specifically like to see addressed in the programme, based on their experiences in ELC services. This sample of early childhood teachers was accessed through an online closed forum called 'Preschool Practitioners and Providers Ireland' which serves as a support group for educators and a platform to share ideas and approaches to curriculum. Consultation took place through inviting participants to complete short mixed-method questionnaire (Johnson and Onweugbuzie 2004), related to their experiences to date in working with autistic children; previous CPD accessed; interest in engaging in a CPD programme in the area of autism and the specific areas they were particularly interested in learning about. This survey is included in Appendix A of the report.

Of 246 participants, 80% considered themselves to be very experienced or experienced in working with autistic children, however 60% had never accessed CPD related to autism and 98% expressed an interest in engaging in CPD in the area. In response to the question about what areas of autism participants would be interested in learning more about, key areas referred to were communication; social skills; sensory processing and behaviour management as encapsulated in the words of one of the participants: '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'. Fostering positive relationships with parents was also a prominent area identified: 'I think to be able to talk to the parents about concerns you would have. Finding the right approach or using appropriate language/words'. Of 98% who expressed interest in engaging in CPD, the majority responded that they would like to learn more about autism as summarised in the words of one respondent: 'I honestly don't know anything about autism. I would love to be able to understand more about the condition'.






In addition to the consultation with early childhood teachers, AsIAM also consulted with parents of autistic children to identify how they feel they could be better supported during their child's early years education. The link to this short questionnaire for parents was made available in a support forum for parents of children on the autism spectrum, 'Autism Mamai' (Autism Mamai 2018). Parents are the primary educators and carers for their children (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009), therefore AsIAM felt it was imperative that the programme content designed to upskill early childhood teachers also met the needs of parents who may require support pre, during and post autism diagnosis. A copy of the questionnaire that was distributed to parents is available at Appendix B. Of the 103 parents who participated, 45% felt very supported in the partnership with their child's early childhood teacher, with 34% only feeling somewhat supported and 20% feeling unsupported. When parents were asked what recommendations they would have for ways in which they could have been better supported, the most prevalent theme emerging was better communication with parents: *'more feedback from teachers and SNAs. 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 ie what activities and learning took place'*. Another key theme, which emerged was a need for further CPD to be made available for early childhood teachers; *'trained personnel in mainstream preschools'* and *'better trained staff'*. The responses of both early childhood teachers and parents of children with a diagnosis of autism therefore informed the development of the aims and content of *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*.

### **Programme Aims**

The primary aim of the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme was to develop knowledge(s), practices and values to support early childhood teachers in cultivating inclusive environments for autistic children.





This aim was aligned with the findings emerging from the pre-programme early childhood and parent survey combined with evidence-based practice in effectively meeting the needs of autistic children in the early years (Urban et al. 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). Urban, Robson and Scacchi (2017) refer to knowledge in the plural to capture the nature of knowledge as diverse rather than a single entity. The authors suggest that knowledge is continually emerging and is co-constructed by all involved in the ELC context, including children, families, communities, early childhood teachers and researchers. Practices may not be equated with skills as they are purposeful and require ongoing engagement in critical reflection, while underpinning values go beyond attitudes and require articulation

An associated aim of the programme was to ensure the content delivered met the needs of the parents and families and facilitated building partnerships between parents and early childhood teachers through locating the child's learning and development as the central focus of the programme. Stemming from these aims, nine programme learning outcomes were identified.

### **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.



## Overview of Programme Content

The content of the programme as summarised in Figure 1 evolved from the aims and objectives detailed above.



*Figure 1. Overview of the Content of the Teach Me AsIAm Early Years Programme*

## Model of Delivery

As previously noted, analysis of the initial 246 questionnaire responses of early childhood teachers consulted prior to the development of the programme, indicated that 60% of early childhood teachers had never accessed CPD in the area of autism. Many also expressed the need for a programme that was practical and provided strategies to be used within practice, for example, 'how to make an environment inclusive to ensure full participation in service'; 'handling transitions, strategies for communication'; 'how to make support plans for children and useful resources/methods than can be used in the classroom to help a child with autism'. It became clear therefore that the content of the programme needed to focus heavily on practical strategies to help with all areas of learning, while simultaneously being underpinned by a robust theoretical evidence-base.

In view of the responses from early childhood teachers and parents, it was considered that in order to provide an effective CPD programme focused on supporting the learning experience of the participants, a two-day programme would be required. Day One of the programme focused therefore on the content delivery, 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 practice, and optimises learning, the concept of reflective practice (NCCA 2009; Tynan 2018) was central to Day Two, which provided opportunities for discussion with peers; interrogation of group case-studies and class discussions on how the learning from Day One was applied to practice. See Table 1 below for the schedule of programme delivery.

Location	Day 1	Day 2
Dublin North	12 <sup>th</sup> February	2 <sup>nd</sup> May
Galway	15 <sup>th</sup> February	3 <sup>rd</sup> May
Dublin South	19 <sup>th</sup> February	8 <sup>th</sup> May
Kerry	22 <sup>nd</sup> February	10 <sup>th</sup> May
Mayo	8 <sup>th</sup> March	24 <sup>th</sup> May
Cavan	12 <sup>th</sup> March	28 <sup>th</sup> May
Clare	15 <sup>th</sup> March	31 <sup>st</sup> May
Westmeath	21 <sup>st</sup> March	6 <sup>th</sup> June
Waterford	23 <sup>rd</sup> March	8 <sup>th</sup> June
Cork (Glanmire)	4 <sup>th</sup> April	16 <sup>th</sup> May
Kildare	9 <sup>th</sup> April	11 <sup>th</sup> June
Kilkenny	12 <sup>th</sup> April	13 <sup>th</sup> June
Meath	16 <sup>th</sup> April	21 <sup>st</sup> May
Donegal	19 <sup>th</sup> April	20 <sup>th</sup> June
Cork City	25 <sup>th</sup> April	17 <sup>th</sup> May
Limerick	26 <sup>th</sup> April	28 <sup>th</sup> June

Attention was also directed to the literature on adult learning in developing the programme and the specific contexts of early childhood teachers. Participants were encouraged to be self-directed in their learning; a value was placed by the tutor on participants' experience to enhance and deepen learning; questioning was purposefully used to elicit participants' understanding; the case studies employed were grounded in practice and multi-modal presentation of materials was prioritised (Knowles 1980; 1984; Ring, O'Sullivan, Ryan and Bourke 2018).

## Conclusion

With ever increasing participation in the ECCE scheme, resulting in an increase in the number of children with diverse needs participating in early childhood education, the associated need for early childhood teachers to have the requisite knowledge(s), practices and values central to providing high-quality ECEC for autistic children is evident (Urban et al. 2011; Long 2018; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). The need for CPD in relation to providing effectively for autistic children is clear from the findings of the early childhood teacher and parent surveys, which informed the development of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*. In evaluating the impact of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*, the researchers were concerned to interrogate what the literature tells us about CPD and providing effectively for children with autism in order to inform the data-analysis. A review of the literature is now presented in Chapter Three.



### Introduction

Similar to the experience of many countries internationally, Ireland has experienced exponential growth in the prevalence of autism, with an estimated 1 in every 65 of the school population, equating to approximately 14,000 students having an autism diagnosis (Hill, Zuckerman and Fombonne 2015; National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2015; 2016). While education systems have made substantial progress in providing for children with autism, challenges, *inter alia*, related to adequate resourcing; the availability of multi-professional expertise and teacher competency remain, in terms of ensuring all children and families experience high-quality experiences (Daly et al. 2016).

Autistic individuals experience the world in a fundamentally different and diverse way than those who do not have autism (Grandin 1995; Barton 2012; Harris 2018). It has been suggested that teachers must be in a position to adapt their teaching in a manner that has been described as non-intuitive in order to effect learning for autistic children (Ring and Prunty 2012; Jordan 2013; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018; Egan 2018; Griffin 2018). An inextricable link between children accessing high-quality early learning and care (ELC) and the professional competence of the early childhood teacher is consistently identified in the literature (Urban et al. 2011; Whitebread, Kvalja and O'Connor 2015; Urban, Robson and Scacchi 2017; Ring, O'Sullivan and Wall 2018). In relation to providing high-quality ELC for autistic children, the importance of teachers accessing autism-specific continuing professional development (CPD) continues to be highlighted in the literature (Jones et al. 2008; Parsons et al. 2009; Long 2018). This chapter explores why a counter-intuitive leap is necessary in providing high-quality ELC experiences for autistic children; the current professional education continuum (PEC) for early childhood teachers in Ireland is explored and a model for CPD, within which the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* is located, suggested.





## **Autism: Why a Counter-Intuitive Leap is Necessary**

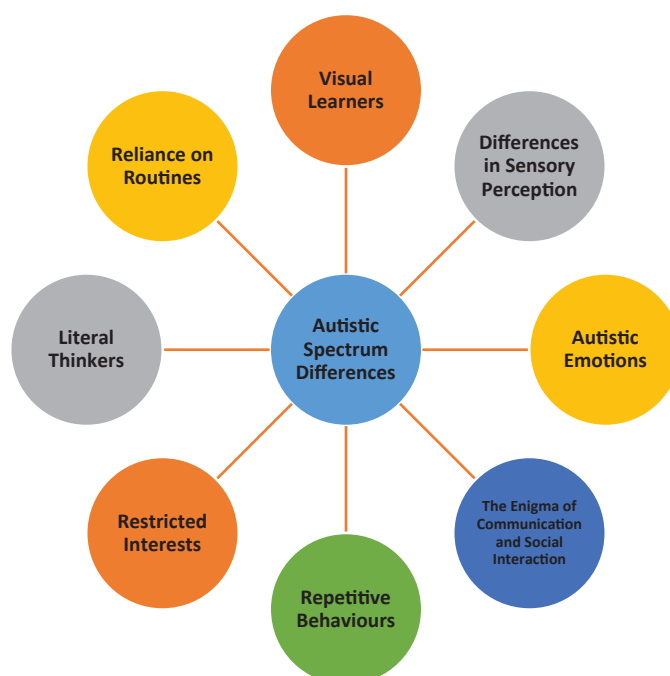
The origin of the expression autism/autistic is attributed to Bleuler, a psychiatrist, who in 1911, coined the term from the Greek word 'autos' meaning 'self' to describe a basic disturbance in schizophrenia, which led the individual to withdraw from relationships with people and the outside world (McKeon 2005). Our understanding of autism has developed significantly on a global basis since 1911 and we now understand that autism can be explained as a particular lens through which individuals experience the world (Silberman 2015). As Silberman advises, we have to begin thinking smarter about people who think differently.

eighteen years ago the Report of the *Task Force on Autism* in Ireland described autism as being characterised by a triad of impairments in social interaction, patterns of communication and flexibility of thought and imagination (Department of Education and Skills (DES) 2001). However Ring, McKenna and Wall (2014) advise that we should exercise caution in asserting that individuals with autism have impaired imagination, in view of the evidence suggesting that many children and adults with autism have extraordinary imaginative and creative capacities (O'Sullivan 2018; O'Sullivan, Ring and Horgan 2018). The authors suggest that the field of autism has been characterised by terminology and definitions associated with negativity, impairment and medicalisation, which are not appropriate in educational contexts. This use of this nomenclature leads to a perception that the autistic individual owns the 'problem', which is there to be 'cured', failing therefore to cultivate an appreciation of the 'differences' associated with autism, which enrich and enhance our lives and the lives of autistic individuals.

Ring, McKenna and Wall (2014) therefore reject the concept of 'disorder' and suggest that the triad should be considered as a triad of differences, and the final element of the triad as a difference in flexibility of thought and behaviour. This position has also recently been adopted by Ring, Daly and Wall (2018), who suggest that 'difference' rather than 'disorder' is a preferable starting point to begin to understand autism.


The most recent classification, The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-V), includes differences in sensory perception as one of the potentially defining features of autism (American Psychiatric Association (APA) 2013). General learning disabilities and a range of diverse additional needs may also co-exist with autism, and are expressed differently for each individual. Combining the autobiographical reports of autistic individuals who have written extensively about their experiences, with the implications of the features associated with autism, suggests key areas that it is imperative teachers consider when providing for autistic children from early years and beyond (Williams 1993; Grandin 1995; Sainsbury 2000; Jackson 2002; Barton 2012; Silberman 2015).

The presence and interaction of the defining differences of autism; intellectual abilities and specific additional needs therefore affect the manner in which the autistic individual experiences, understands and interacts with the world. The defining differences associated with autism are summarised in Figure 2. below.



*Figure 2. The Defining Differences of Autism (adapted from Ring, McKenna and Wall 2014)*

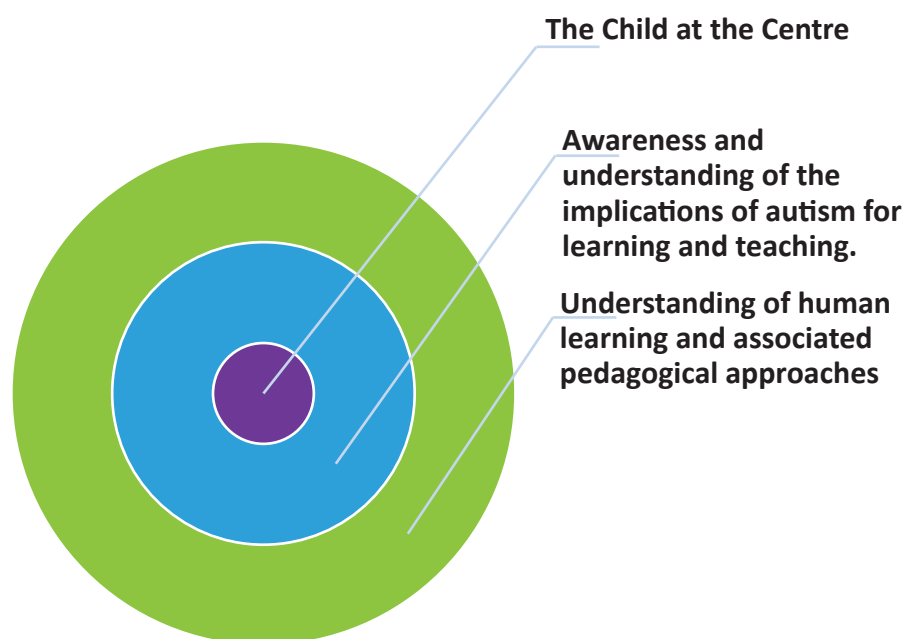




Powell and Jordan (1993) refer to the intuitive pedagogical understanding of teachers, which is formed on a template of understanding of human learning, in which certain ground rules, based on a range of common principles are accepted. Key principles, which should underpin effective pedagogy, and are generally applicable to all learners have been identified in the literature. These include instruction for near and far transfer of learning; presentation of examples by the key difference; scaffolded transition to self-directed learning; mastery learning; development of automaticity; focus on learning not performance goals, situated cognition; knowledge of, and mental experimentation with one's own thought processes; strategies to foster self-regulation, inter-leaved learning and the creation of motivating learning contexts through employing specific pedagogical approaches that stimulate engagement (Lewis and Norwich 2000; O'Sullivan and Ring 2016). These elements of effective pedagogy have recently been further interrogated by Ring, O'Sullivan, Ryan and Burke (2018) in the context of crafting a responsive pedagogy for a redeveloped primary curriculum in Ireland, which has resonance also for early childhood education. The defining differences associated with autism summarised in Figure 2 above necessitate a re-examination by teachers of the intuitive pedagogical understanding required to operationalise the key principles of effective pedagogy.

Powell and Jordan (1993) explain that the template of understanding of human learning, in which the ground rules based on the range of common principles identified above are accepted, has to be interpreted differently for autistic individuals. For example, the principles that learners are naturally motivated to make sense of the world and solve new problems according to previously acquired knowledge and skills and that a lack of confidence may be associated with an inability to initiate do not automatically apply in the case of children with autism.

understanding of human learning and associated pedagogical approaches, and informed by both an awareness and understanding of the implications of autism for learning and teaching. See Figure 3 below.



*Figure 3. Providing Effectively for Autistic Children in Education Settings*

In taking this counter-intuitive leap, educators must clearly understand the distinct difference between awareness and understanding, summarised by Harris (2018: p. xiv) as ‘awareness is about knowing something exists, understanding is about stepping into a person’s shoes and validating their perspective’.

Ensuring that autistic children attending ELC services in Ireland have access to teachers with the requisite awareness and understanding has implications therefore for the PEC for early childhood teachers in Ireland.

## Professional Education Continuum

In recent years, the demand for a graduate-led workforce to provide for high-quality ELC services in Ireland has led to increased levels of government investment and attention to creating a professional education continuum for staff working in ELC settings (Ring, O’Sullivan and Wall 2018). Sustained public financial support has been identified as key to creating high-quality ELC provision (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD) 2017). Critically, appropriate levels of funding provide for the recruitment of staff, who are qualified to support all children’s holistic development. Expenditure on ELC across OECD countries accounts for an average of 0.8% gross domestic product (GDP) (OECD 2017). However differences between countries are significant, with Ireland among countries where less than 0.3% of GDP is spent in comparison to countries such as Iceland, Norway and Sweden, who spend 1.7% of GDP on ECEC.

Sexton’s (2007) identification of the eight components of teaching as a profession can be equally applied to the early childhood teacher. See Figure 4 below adapted by Ring, O’Sullivan and Ryan (2018) from Sexton.

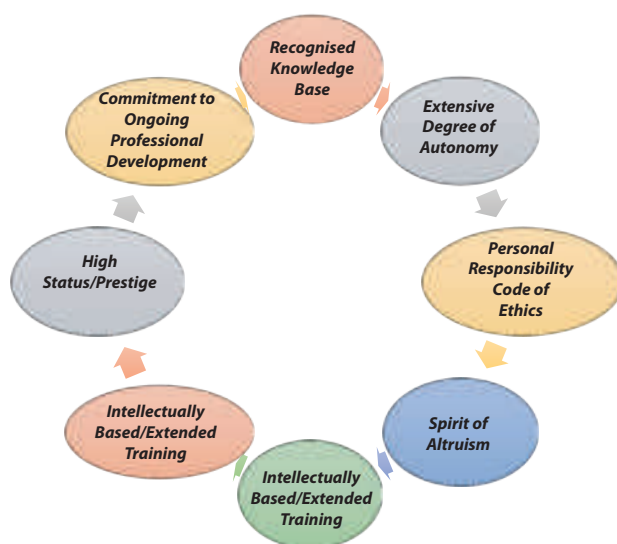



Figure 4. The Eight Components of Teaching as a Profession (adapted from Sexton 2007)



Ring, O'Sullivan and Ryan (2018) suggest that two of Sexton's components related to appropriate remuneration and high status/prestige continue to be compromised in a sector where poor working conditions and inadequate remuneration continue to undermine the professionalisation of early childhood teachers. However, the concepts of a recognised knowledge base; a commitment to ongoing professional development; the availability of intellectually based/extended training; the role of personal responsibility and adhering to a code of ethics and teacher-autonomy are acknowledged in recent developments by the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) in Ireland to engage in a consultation process in relation to Professional Award Criteria and Guidelines for Initial Professional Education (Level 7 and Level 8) Degree Programmes in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) in Ireland (EYEPU 2017). Reflecting the work of Urban et al. (2011), the EYEPU identifies the programme content from the CoRE Report Individual Competences with reference to knowledge(s), practices and values, which should be included in undergraduate ECEC programmes at Level 7 and Level 8. The three dimensions of knowledge(s), practices and values are identified as applicable to four broad areas: working with children; working with families and communities; working with other professionals and institutions and early childhood in the wider local, national and international context. Critically the EYEPU stresses that 'the list is neither exhaustive nor definitive and will be flavoured by the distinctive elements of each individual programme' (p. 12).

There is no reference to autism in the consultation document, however there are references to the importance of undergraduates being in a position to identify children with special educational needs and elaborating strategies for their inclusion; committing to inclusive educational approaches and offering more personalised and individual learning support to children with special educational needs. In 2010, following the publication of *A Workforce Development Plan for the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in Ireland in 2010*, the findings of the DES' consultative review relating to the quality of the PEC generated some cause for concern (DES 2010; 2016). While there was overall satisfaction with the quality of the PEC, significant gaps were identified in a number of areas.

These gaps worryingly included lack of preparedness to cater for the educational needs of children with additional needs; including those with special educational needs (DES 2016). More recently a report on the findings of the consultation initiated by the EYEPU in 2017 was published (Fillis 2018). Special educational needs (awareness and identifying) was suggested as an area, which should be included as core content in undergraduate programmes. While there was a wide variety of observations highlighting the centrality of supervised practicum placements, there was no reference to a student having to undertake placement with children with diverse abilities.

In view of the myriad of areas suggested by Fillis (2018), it is suggested that due attention must continue to be given to ensuring that Initial Professional Education (IPE) in ECEC is viewed as an element along a continuum and as the foundation stage of learning for the prospective early childhood teachers. Mirroring the expectations for students completing initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, it is not realistic to expect students to adopt specialist roles on completion of a Level 7 or 8 degree programme. Currently therefore, the components of the PEC for early childhood teachers have not been identified, and what is clear is that there are significant gaps in undergraduate ECEC programmes related to the knowledge(s); practices and values necessary for providing for children with diverse abilities, including autistic children. It therefore remains critical that early childhood teachers are provided with opportunities to access high-quality CPD to ensure that they can provide appropriately for autistic children at this critical phase in children's learning and development.





## The Early Childhood Education and Care Professional Education Continuum

It is acknowledged that currently in Ireland the ECEC PEC is in a state of flux and further consultation is required to replicate the structured and regulated approach to ITE with that of IPE in ECEC. Traditionally both ITE and IPE programmes have focused on a theory-to-practice approach, where teacher candidates engage with theory in the expectation that they implement this theory in their practice working with children (Aker 2016). The challenges experienced by candidates during IPE/ITE programmes in striking this balance have been well-documented in research (Shulman 1987; Bates 2002; Cochran-Smith 2001; 2005; Hick et al. 2018)

The centrality of teacher candidates being in a position to reflect on their practice through the lens of educational theories has also been consistently highlighted in the literature (Schön 2003; Aker 2016; Bonfield and Horgan 2016). A range of problems has been identified with the theory-to-practice approach, which may partly explain why early childhood and primary/post-primary teachers continue to report a lack of preparedness to cater for the educational needs of children with additional needs; including those with special educational needs (DES 2016; Hicks et al. 2018). Recent research in Ireland conducted by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) further highlights the skill gaps teacher candidates report in relation to inclusive teaching as noted by a participant's observation:

*And even as a new teacher going in to the school and I've a few autistic children and I didn't know what to do to be honest ... in the college it's like "here's what a student with autism does, now out you go and teach him". You know, but it's so, it's such a wide spectrum. It's like they inform us, but then go off and do what you can*

(Hicks et al. 2018: 104)

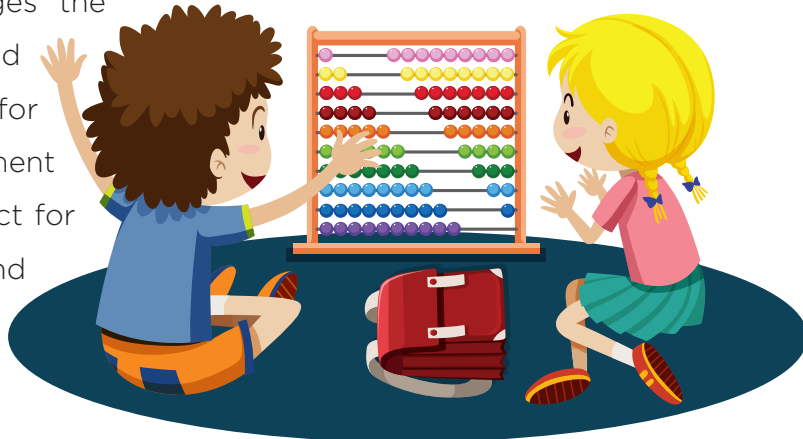
Further discussion is required in relation to the location on the PEC of the knowledge(s); practices and values necessary to provide effectively for autistic children and the theoretical framework within which these can be most effectively translated into practice by teacher candidates. However, what is clear in the interim, is that there is a need to provide CPD opportunities for early childhood teachers focused on ensuring that teachers have the requisite knowledge(s); practices and values to provide effectively for autistic children.

### **Identifying the Requisite Knowledge(s), Practices and Values Required to Provide Effectively for Autistic Children**

A range of differential knowledge(s), practices and values has been identified as being effective in providing effectively for autistic children (Jordan, Jones and Murray 1998; Egan 2018; Fitzgerald; Long 2018). Particular differences experienced by autistic children, interalia, in relation to communication, motivation, transfer of knowledge and skills, sensory responsivity, initiation and social interaction require early childhood teachers to be expert in specific knowledge(s), practices and values (Ring, Daly and Wall 2018).

### **Values**

Values are reflected in the pedagogy we adopt as early childhood teachers in terms of our theoretical perspectives about how children learn and develop and our beliefs about education (Jones and Shelton 2011). Expert early childhood teachers' conceptual framework of autism therefore should be informed by a perspective that both acknowledges the overt manifestations of difference and the associated implications for children's learning and development (Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). A respect for the way children with autism think and learn should lie at the heart of educators' beliefs about autism.



This respect should be aligned with the principles of an inclusive culture articulated in the *Early Childhood Care and Education National Inclusion Charter* (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2016) and summarised in Figure 5 below.



*Figure 5. Principles of Inclusive Early Childhood Care and Education (DCYA 2016)*

In accordance with current philosophical, policy and research perspectives, children should be viewed as active participants in their own learning and development and their views valued and responded to (United Nations 1989; Lundy 2007; Ring and O’Sullivan 2016). Recent research, in which autistic children participated confirmed the importance of being responsive to, and enabling children’s communicative initiations through listening and responding to children’s voices (Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2012; O’Sullivan, Ring and Horgan 2018).



## Knowledge(s) and Practices

Table 2 adapted from Ring (2010) provides an overview of the differences associated with autism and the implications of these differences for children's learning and development. This is a summary of these differences only and is not exhaustive. These are further elaborated on by Ring, Daly and Wall (2018).

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:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Literal thinkers</i></li> <li>• <i>Confused by the rules that govern social behaviour</i></li> <li>• <i>Require direct teaching in social skills</i></li> <li>• <i>Necessary to structure opportunities for the child to use social skills in different situations</i></li> <li>• <i>Awareness of the difficulties for the child inherent in less structured situations such as break and lunchtime, and in transition between lessons.</i></li> </ul>
Differences in Language and Communication:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The child needs support in understanding the purpose and value of communication</i></li> <li>• <i>Attention needs to be directed to teaching the social aspects of language e.g. turn-taking.</i></li> <li>• <i>Direct teaching of gestures, facial expression, vocal intonation and body language</i></li> <li>• <i>Use of visual material and/signing to support and facilitate the child's communicative initiations and responses</i></li> <li>• <i>Providing precise instructions for the child to follow.</i></li> </ul>
Differences in Flexibility of Thought and Behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>The child must be helped to cope with new and varying activities</i></li> <li>• <i>Pre-empting the child's anxiety, which results from being presented with unstructured or unfamiliar situations without prior warning/explanation</i></li> <li>• <i>Devising and implementing a structured play-programme.</i></li> </ul>
Differences in Sensory Responsivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Adjustments must be made to the classroom to address the child's under-sensitivity/over-sensitivity to noise, smell, taste, light, touch or movement</i></li> <li>• <i>Eliciting relevant information regarding the child's eating, drinking and sleeping irregularities</i></li> <li>• <i>Structuring the classroom environment to reduce distractions</i></li> <li>• <i>Securing the child's attention prior to issuing instructions/engaging in conversation</i></li> <li>• <i>Avoiding insisting on eye-contact</i></li> <li>• <i>Provision of structures which assist the child in understanding the duration of tasks</i></li> <li>• <i>Making the links between different tasks clear to the child</i></li> <li>• <i>Direct teaching of target skills with directedness and clarity.</i></li> </ul>

It is suggested that knowledge(s) and practices necessary to provide effectively for autistic children should be aligned with the differences and the implications for practice summarised in Table 2 above.

## Achieving Expertise: The Role of Deliberate Practice

Ericsson and Towne (2010) observe that experience is necessary both to acquire skill for an unfamiliar task and to adequately perform that task in a domain of expertise. Critically the authors conclude that prolonged engagement in domain-specific activities is not sufficient in itself to ensure expert performance. Rather intense and deliberate concentration on improving particular aspects of performance is associated with expert performance. It is suggested therefore that experience in the knowledge(s), practices and skills required to provide effectively for autistic children must be augmented by deliberate practice. The key elements of deliberate practice include a willingness to reflect on, and question these knowledge(s); practices and skills and be receptive to feedback from experience and peers. Figure 6 below illustrates the qualitative difference between the behaviour associated with automaticity and that associated with expert performance.

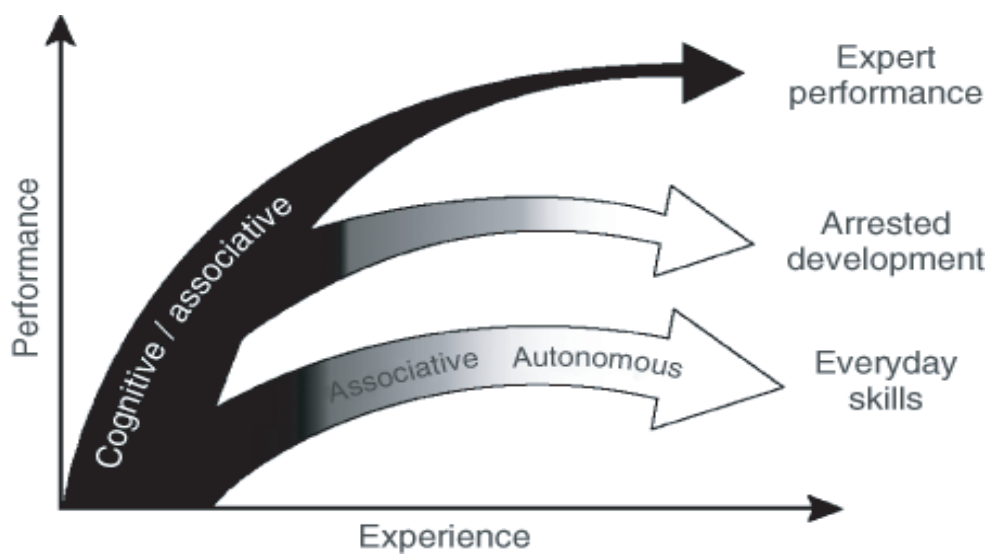
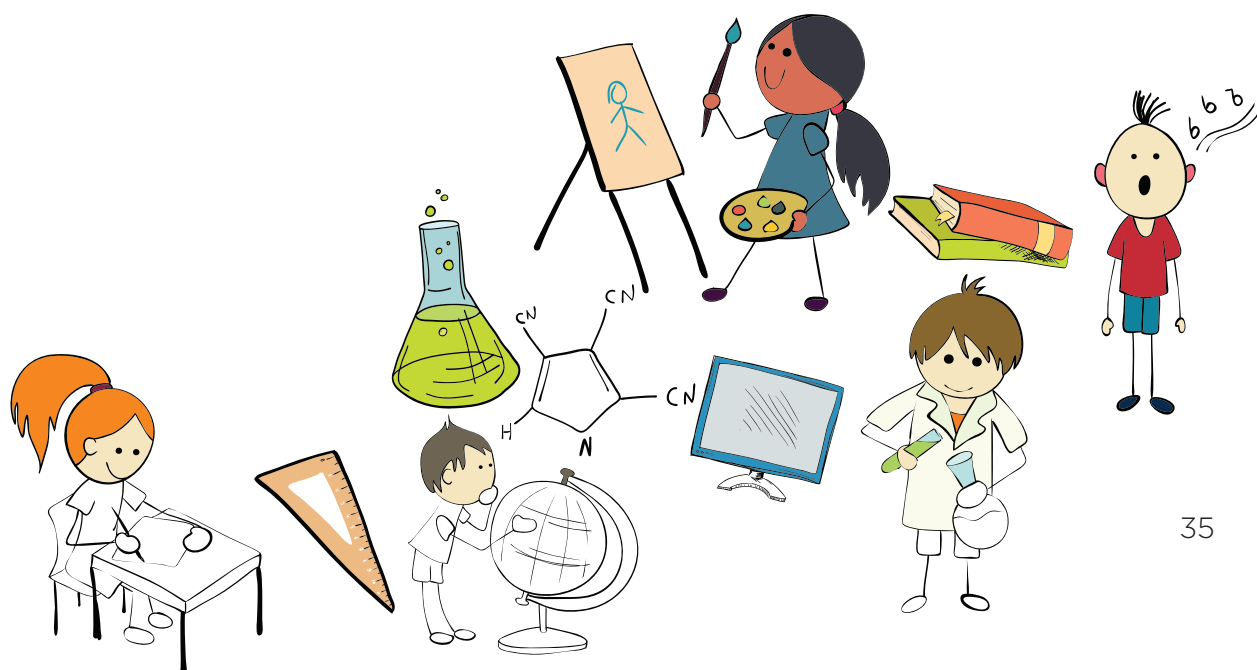


Figure 6. The Trajectory of Expert Performance (Ericsson and Towne 2010)

Expert performance is distinguished by a disposition that goes beyond automaticity and engages in increasingly complex mental representations to attain higher levels of control of performance. Expert performers therefore remain within the 'cognitive' and 'associative' phases through engaging in the deliberate practice referred to previously. At some point Ericsson and Towne (2010) point out that some experts may stop engaging in deliberate practice, leading to premature automation, noted above as 'arrested development'.

## Conclusion

The literature suggests that providing enriched ELC experiences for autistic children requires early childhood teachers to have the requisite knowledge(s), practices and values, which requires taking a child-centred counter-intuitive leap, informed by both an awareness and understanding of the implications of autism for learning and teaching. In view of the fact that in Ireland the ECEC PEC is in a state of flux, it is imperative that early childhood teachers are provided with CPD opportunities to develop expertise that enables them to engage in deliberate practice and go beyond automaticity. In this context, the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme was designed to provide autism-specific CPD for early childhood teachers. The evaluation of the programme described in the next chapter was focused therefore on evaluating the impact of the programme on early childhood teachers' capacity to effectively include autistic children in early childhood settings.



### Introduction

In developing a methodological framework to evaluate the impact of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* on early childhood teachers' capacity to effectively include autistic children in early learning and care (ELC) services, the researchers adopted a multi-method approach. The researchers also remained cognisant of the criticisms levied at evaluations of continuing professional development (CPD) vis-à-vis a reliance on participant-satisfaction feedback to the neglect of establishing the impact of CPD on subsequent practice (Guskey 2000; 2002; Muijs et al. 2004; Ring 2010). Within the time frame for this evaluation therefore, the researchers constructed a broad evaluative framework to capture participants' satisfaction with the programme in addition to the application of the learning from the programme to practice. Ethical approval for this research was secured from the Mary Immaculate College Ethics Committee (MIREC). All participants in the research were assured of confidentiality, anonymity and strict adherence by the researchers to guidelines related to data storage and retention. Additionally due consideration was given to issues relating to question design; voluntary participation; informed consent and assent (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2012; Mukherji and Albon 2018).

In this chapter, evaluation research is defined; the research strategy and design are delineated; the methodological approach, data-analysis, access and sampling decisions explained and trustworthiness and research-limitations interrogated.

### Defining Evaluation

Evaluation research can be described as a type of applied research, that seeks to provide answers to practical, real-world problems concerning the impact of a policy or a programme (Kidder, Judd and Smith 1986; Rossi, Lipsey and Freeman 2004; Shaw, Greene and Mark 2006). Qualitative methods in evaluation can be used exclusively or combined with quantitative methods (Dahler-Larsen 2018).

The distinctiveness of evaluation research can be understood through four specific conceptual dimensions: an evaluand (the programme or policy being evaluated); values associated with the evaluation; the proposed purpose of the evaluation and a systematic methodological approach to the generation of knowledge (Shadish, Cook and Leviton 1991). The research strategy and design for this evaluation is aligned within these conceptual dimensions.

### Research Strategy and Design

The research strategy and design considered the inextricable relationship between the evaluand; values; purpose of the evaluation and the development of a systematic methodological approach as summarised Figure 7 below (Dahler-Larsen 2018).

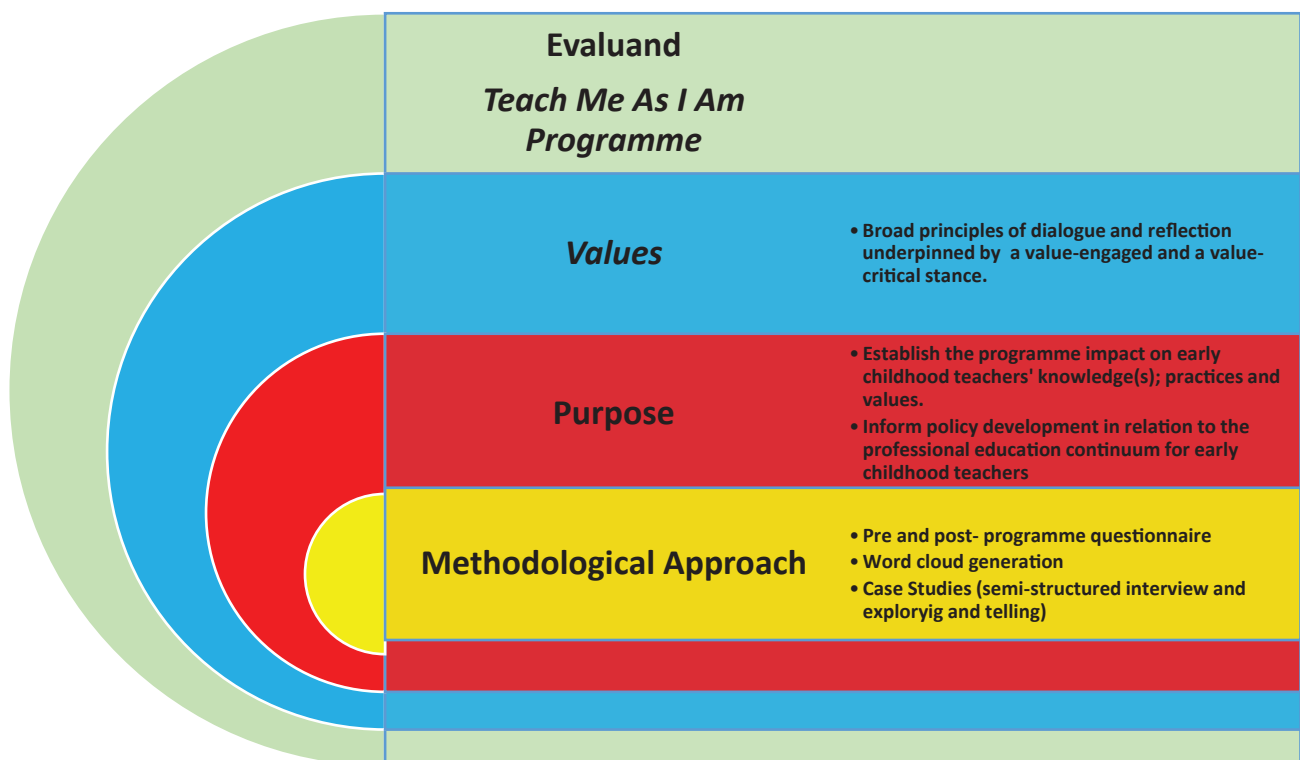




Figure 7. Research Strategy and Design in Evaluation Research



As noted in previous chapters the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* was developed specifically to provide early childhood teachers with the knowledge(s), practices and values central to providing high-quality ELC for autistic children and to ensure that the content met the needs of parents and families of children attending ELC services (Urban et al. 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). Believing that both researchers' and participants' values are 'integral to evaluation' research, (Dahler-Larsen 2018: 870), the researchers maintained both a value-engaged and a value-critical stance throughout the evaluation (Schwandt 2002). Core values underpinning the evaluation are the researchers' belief in collaborative dialogue, inclusive democratic deliberation and facilitating the participation and representation of all parties in a process of co-participation (Denzin and Lincoln 2018). The researchers were committed to ensuring that the co-construction of meaning manifested in the research findings would be used to both establish the programme impact on early childhood teachers' knowledge(s), practices and values and to inform policy development in relation to the professional education continuum (PEC) for early childhood teachers.

In developing the methodological approach detailed below, the researchers were conscious that the concept of causation in qualitative evaluation is complex and all of the variables that may potentially influence outcomes cannot be controlled for (House 2005). However qualitative evaluation provides an appropriate mechanism for evaluating the effectiveness of a CPD programme provided the researchers penetrate beneath the surface of social realities through seeking to understand the choices and capacities of participants; acknowledge the impact of contexts; analyse programme outcomes and their manifestation in practice; engage with programme policy makers and participants and recognise that programmes are implemented in a changing and permeable social world (Pawson and Tilley 1997; Ring 2010). The methodological approach therefore considered the intricate and complex nature of researching the impact of a CPD programme through exploring multiple sources of evidence using both qualitative and quantitative data-collection methods.




Triangulation is embedded in the research process through the research strategy, data collection and data-analysis, with a specific focus on its relationship with the ‘cutting edge issue’ of emphasising the participation of those whom the evaluation directly impacts (Flick 2018, p. 456). The methodological approach was designed to capture a range of the most relevant data-sources within the time frame for the evaluation.

### **Methodological Approach**

The methodological approach comprised questionnaires; word cloud generation using Mentimeter; semi-structured interviews and exploring and telling (Hein 2018; Mentimeter 2018; Mukherji and Albon 2018; Ring and O’Sullivan 2018). Questionnaires; semi-structured interviews and exploring and telling data-collection instruments were piloted with three participants (including one child), prior to commencing the evaluation in order to satisfactorily fine tune the research procedures (Mukherji and Albon 2018).

### **Questionnaires**

A pre- and post- programme questionnaire for early childhood teachers participating in the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* was designed by the researchers in collaboration with AsIAm and taking into account the pre-programme development consultation process (Mukerji and Albon 2018). Questionnaires were selected based on their potential to capture attitudes; beliefs; opinions; values; experiences and behaviour in addition to demographics and relevant background information (Johnson and Christensen 2017; Mukerji and Albon 2018). The researchers selected questionnaires as a method based on their efficiency in collecting data in the context of the limited time frame for this research project. While some qualitative responses were facilitated, the limitations of questionnaires in terms of indepth exploration of topics such as attitudes; beliefs; opinions; values; experiences and behaviour are duly acknowledged.



The pre-programme questionnaire was designed to explore participants' behaviour; beliefs, knowledge and experiences in relation to the inclusion of autistic children in early childhood settings. 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 in early childhood settings (Urban et al. 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). Both questionnaires included a combination of forced-choice questions and open-ended questions. See Appendix C and D for copies of these questionnaires. In order to optimise response rate, participants were invited to complete the questionnaires at the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* sessions in hard-copy format. Questionnaire data were subsequently inputted by the programme deliverer on the SurveyMonkey® platform (SurveyMonkey Inc. 2018).

### **Word Cloud Generation**

Margolis and Zunjarwad (2018) explore the use of images in the communication of research findings, pointing out that 'visual research is not new, it is among the most ancient forms of understanding' (p. 622). The authors observe the potential of the rapidly changing digital world for producing knowledge and note both the challenge and potential of the shifting control of data from researchers to all those who engage with technology. Word clouds have emerged from the visualisation possibilities inherent in technological advances and utilise software to break text into its component words and identify the frequency with which words appear in the text, which correlates with the size of the words in the associated graphic. Participants at both *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* CPD 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 8 and 9 below provide data on participants' understanding of providing for autistic children in early childhood settings, pre- and post- participation in the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*. It is to be noted that responses have been anonymised and the location does not correspond with the sequence of settings delineated previously in Table 1.





Figure 8. Pre-programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location A

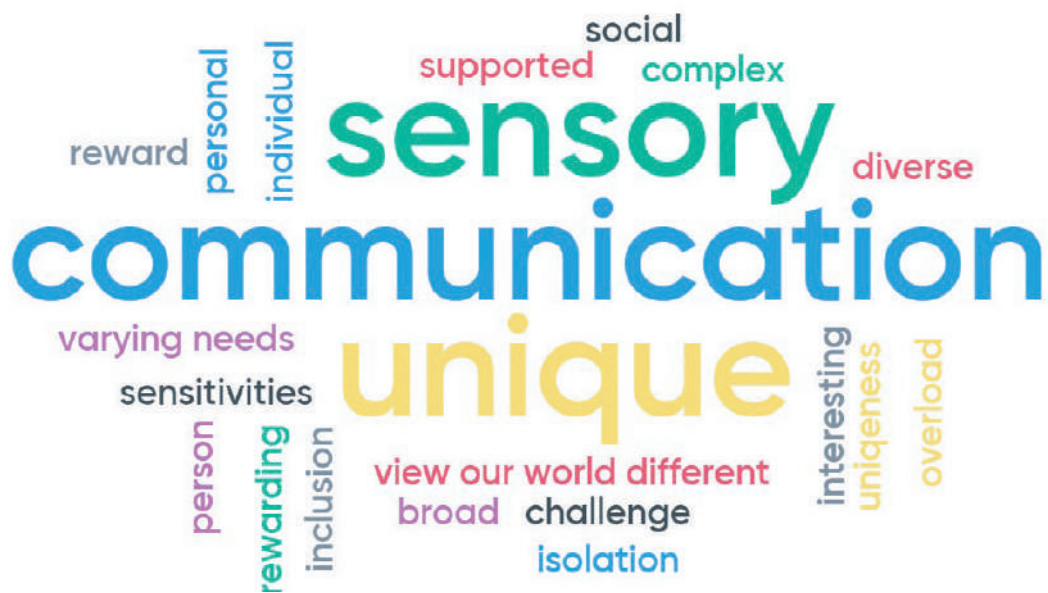



Figure 9. Post-programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location A

Word clouds provide an accessible and engaging summary of word frequency, however while word clouds provide some insight into textual data, it is important to understand that they should be interpreted with caution.



Hein (2018) notes that the size of letters in words combined with the space surrounding letters can make certain words appear more or less important relative to other words in the clouds; impact of colour on how we interpret data requires further research and fonts used can compromise how data are being communication.

### **Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews can be described as conversations with a purpose (Merriam 1998; Denscombe 2010). In research, interviews are necessary when we cannot observe behaviour, feelings or how people interpret the world around them (Merriam 1998). While teachers' self-reports have acknowledged limitations in research, they are however an important vehicle in evaluating the impact of CPD as they provide a basis on which unique individual patterns of professional learning and development, and the potential for impact can be identified (Burchell, Dyson and Rees 2002; Ring 2010). A semi-structured format facilitated a flexible approach and allowed for the probing of participants' perspectives and understanding (Merriam 1998)

Six early childhood teachers in two early childhood settings, who had completed the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*, were invited to participate in semi-structured interviews. The foci of interview questions included the genesis of the decision to apply to participate in the programme; initial professional education (IPE) and CPD to date; the concept of early years education for children with autism; the early childhood teachers' experience of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*; pedagogy and assessment; parental involvement and available support structures. The interviews were recorded using a voice recording device, which was positioned unobtrusively during the interview process. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and uploaded to Quirkos (Quirkos 2017). Figure 10 provides a visual representation of the interview-coding process from Quirkos.




*Figure 10. Interview Coding Process (Quirkos 2017)*

A copy of the semi-structured interview schedule is included in Appendix E

### **Exploring and Telling**

Reflecting the focus on children’s rights and participation in curricula and international charters, a child-led methodology, exploring and telling, was developed by Ring and O’Sullivan (2018) to capture the voices of children with autism in the context of the evaluation (United Nations (UN) 1989; Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (CECDE) 2006; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009; GoI 2018b). The process is introduced to the child based on the child’s developmental level and interests. One child from each early childhood setting was invited to participate in the research and invited to wear a camera to help the researcher understand what was happening in the setting. In effect the child was invited to become a co-researcher in the evaluation. Auto-photography was used to capture how the environment in the early childhood setting appeared from the child’s perspective. Following securing of parental consent and child assent, the child wore a small portable camera during activities in the setting. The video-data was subsequently uploaded to the Observer XT® software (Noldus 2018).



Negotiating access to participants, both at the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* CPD sessions and in the two early childhood settings was not equated with physical access but rather as a process of proceeding across several thresholds that mark the way to the heart of a culture (Woods 1996; Ring 2010). A key focus was maintained on cultivating collaborative dialogue; inclusive democratic deliberation and co-participation (Denzin and Lincoln 2018).

The researchers had access to all participants enrolled in the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* and thus were in a position to invite and include all participants in the questionnaire and word cloud data-collection processes. In selecting two early childhood settings to participate in the semi-structured interviews and exploring and telling, opportunity sampling was used and settings adjacent to the workplace of the researcher conducting the fieldwork were purposefully selected (Emerson 2015). Both children who participated in the exploring and telling process were selected by their respective early childhood settings.

### **Analysis of Data**

Questionnaires generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Quantitative data yielded descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages (SurveyMonkey Inc. 2018). All qualitative data were uploaded on the Quirkos platform (Quirkos 2017). Initially qualitative data from both questionnaires and interview transcripts were analysed using an emergent approach based on the coding of responses with reference to the main ideas being expressed. During the second stage of analysis, initial codes were clustered to form broader themes (Mukherji and Albon 2018). 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. Findings emerging from these data are presented in Chapter Five.

### Trustworthiness

Believing that all research should be concerned with generating valid and reliable knowledge in an ethical manner, the researchers directed particular attention to the concept of trustworthiness as it relates to validity and reliability in the research process (Merriam 1998). In identifying the findings emerging from the quantitative data, procedures leading to final computations were stringently followed and rich description is provided in presenting findings from the qualitative data-analysis to assist the reader in authenticating the findings (Firestone 1987).

The conventional positivist research paradigm examines trustworthiness under the criteria of internal validity, external validity, reliability and objectivity (Lincoln and Guba 1985). Lincoln and Guba suggest that qualitative research should meet the criteria of credibility, trustworthiness, dependability and confirmability to reflect the underlying philosophy of the paradigm. The researchers therefore adopted specific methods related to both paradigms to establish the trustworthiness of the research process and findings as summarised in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Methods Adopted in Establishing the Trustworthiness of the Research Process and Findings	
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

While the researchers were vigilant in mitigating threats to the trustworthiness of the research through adopting the range of strategies in Table 3 above, nevertheless it must be acknowledged that these threats can never be completely eliminated from research, which is conducted in the real world (Robson and McCarten 2015). Participants may have been influenced by a range of variables when responding to questionnaires; world clouds and interview questions, which potentially limits the generalisability of the findings. The heterogeneous nature of the needs and abilities of autistic children further limits the potential for generalisability as does the potential for researcher bias. On completion of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*, participants may wish to validate their participation, which may then be reflected in their responses. However, the researchers believe that the evaluation findings reduce uncertainty and assist in developing better understanding (Giangreco and Taylor 2003). Concurring with Bratlinger et al. (2005), the researchers suggest that qualitative research does not make claims to create universal knowledge for policy or offer universal prescriptions for practice, rather it presents research findings that can inform policymakers and practitioners.

## Conclusion

In the next chapter, the findings from the data generated through each of the methodological approaches described above are combined and presented with reference to the key themes that emerged from the composite data-analysis. Word clouds; extracts from data and video stills are used to augment and support the findings.




### Introduction

The findings of the evaluation emerging from an analysis of the data generated by the pre- and post-programme questionnaire; word clouds; six semi-structured interviews and two children’s experiences through exploring and telling are presented in this chapter. For the purposes of maintaining confidentiality and preserving participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms are used to identify early learning and care (ELC) services; interview participants and the children who participated in the exploring and telling process. The pre-programme questionnaire was disseminated to 311 participants who completed Day One of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* between February 2018 and May 2018. Of the 311 participants who completed the first day of the continuing professional development (CPD) programme, 281 responded to the survey, providing a response rate of 91%. The post-programme questionnaire was distributed to the 272 participants who returned to complete the programme on Day Two. Out of the 272 participants, 259 responded to the post-programme questionnaire, providing a response rate of 95%. However it is to be noted also that not all participants on Day One or Day Two completed all questions, which accounts for the disparity in frequency of responses in a number of Tables in this chapter.

As reported in Table 4, educators participating in the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* were working across community, private settings and those based in primary schools, with the majority of respondents working in private settings.

Table 4. Profile of Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme Participants’ Settings		
Setting Type	Frequency	Percentage
Community-based Settings	91	32.73%
Private Settings	156	56.12%
Settings located in Primary Schools	31	11.15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>278</b>	<b>100%</b>



Participants were also asked to indicate if their service provided a full day-care service, a sessional service or an alternative mode of delivery: 38.43% (n=108) of respondents described their service as a full-day setting, 53.74% (n=151) as sessional and 7.83% (n=22) as 'other'. Responses in the 'other' category included provision such as home tutor, nanny or volunteer.

Consistent with previous research, these findings affirm the diversity existing in terms of provision, which includes a mix of private and community-run settings offering full day-care and sessional services (Ring et al. 2016; Pobal 2017). Reflecting the national roll-out of the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme previously detailed in Table 1, 51.62% (n=143) of respondents reported working in a rural setting while 48.38% (n=134) classified their setting as an urban setting.

The chapter is delineated with reference to the themes that emerged from the composite analysis of the data described in the previous chapter and linked with pertinent literature. While the themes are presented individually below, there are inextricable connections between these themes, which are not therefore mutually exclusive. An overview of the themes, which emerged from the composite data-analysis is provided in Figure 11 below.





*Figure 11. Overview of Themes Emerging from the Composite Data-Analysis*

In reporting the findings from the semi-structured interviews, and in order to maintain participants' confidentiality and anonymity, the two settings are referred to as Aibreann (translates from the Irish as 'April') 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 (Aibreann) and Jane (Réalt).


### **Initial Professional Education**

Consonant with the findings of the literature review in Chapter Three, participants' educational qualifications reflected the increased focus on Initial Professional Education (IPE) for staff working in ELC services (Ring, O'Sullivan and Wall 2018). The pattern in the current data resonates with increased government investment and the national trend of increasing levels of staff qualifications at IPE level in the early years sector over the past decade (Pobal 2017).

Table 5 below provides an overview of 277 participants' qualifications in relation to the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) (Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) 2018). This data was provided at the pre-programme questionnaire phase of the research. Four participants elected not to answer the question on qualifications.

Table 5. Qualifications of Participants at Pre-Programme Phase		
Qualification Level	Frequency	Percentage
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%
<b>Total</b>	<b>277</b>	<b>100%</b>

Findings relating to qualifications are consistent with prior data in terms of the diversity of respondents' qualifications (Pobal 2017). Consistent with the findings from the Pobal 2016/2017 annual national survey on staff working in ELC services, which identifies 63% cent of the early years workforce as having a qualifications at a Level 6 Certificate or above, the majority of respondents in the current sample had also attained a qualification at Level 6 or above. This pattern reflects the recent changes in minimum qualifications requirements with pre-school team-leaders now being required to hold a minimum of a Level 6 certificate in childcare, with all other staff requiring a minimum of a Level 5 certificate in childcare (Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) 2018). However the diversity in staff qualifications at 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 2018).



Participants in the research frequently commented that autism was a topic rarely discussed in detail during IPE programmes. One questionnaire participant noted that while she had achieved a Level 5 qualification, autism was insufficiently addressed during the programme: *'while I have completed my Level 5 in early childhood education, I feel we did not receive enough training regarding autism'*. This was reiterated by participants with Level 6, 7 and 8 qualifications as captured by two interview participants with a Level 8 qualification: *'I genuinely don't remember doing that much to do with additional needs at all'* (A1) and *'we had a few lectures on autism but we didn't properly go into a lot'* (R2).

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). Related to this finding was the observation in relation to practicum experiences by another early childhood teacher that *'you know we didn't go out in placement until our third year in [name of higher education institution] as well, which I thought was ridiculous. Now looking back'* (R1). This reflects Fillis' (2018) observation that currently students are not required to undertake placement at IPE with children with diverse abilities and also the lack of a systematic approach to placement opportunities at IPE level.

### **A Continuing Professional Development Potpourri**

Given that CPD opportunities are now recognised as a key indicator of quality ECCE programming (Whitebread, Kvalja and O'Connor 2015), a number of questions in the pre-programme questionnaire were designed to gather data on participants' prior CPD participation in the areas of inclusion and autism. An indication of the extent to which participants reported previously engaging in CPD activities focused on inclusion and autism is provided in Table 6.


Table 6. Participants' Participation in Continuing Professional Development in the Areas of Inclusion and Autism Prior to Commencing the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme		
Type of Continuing Professional Development (CPD)	Participants who had Undertaken CPD	Participants who had not Undertaken CPD
	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
CPD in the Area of Inclusion	53.7%	46.3%
CPD in the Area of Autism	26.1%	73.9%

While over half of participants reported undertaking CPD in the area of inclusion, less than 30% of respondents reported undertaking CPD activities related to autism. This presents a serious cause for concern in view of the identified need for educators to take a child-centred counter-intuitive pedagogical leap in order to provide effectively for autistic children (Ring Daly and Wall 2018; Silberman 2015). Several questionnaire participants specifically alluded to the limited amount of information on autism at CPD courses, such as: *'various courses over the years that included autism as a small module but was very limited information'*, observing that: *'autism is neglected when it comes to training'*. While it is acknowledged that the establishment of a CPD infrastructure for early childhood educators was announced in April 2018 (Zappone 2018), the current absence of a CPD infrastructure was evident in the varied and ad hoc CPD activities undertaken by participants in the area of inclusion and autism. A CPD potpourri was evident in terms of the structure; content and providers of the CPD engaged in by participants.



In reporting on CPD activities related to inclusion, participants referred to engaging in workshops; one-day programmes; short programmes; modules on inclusion in the context of IPE and CPD programmes (face-to-face; online and blended); special needs assistant programmes at Level 5 on the NFQ (QQI 2018) and post-graduate and Master's programmes related to special education. The focus of these programmes was broad and was reported to include the access and inclusion model (AIM); special educational needs; inclusion; speech and language; neurodevelopment; lámh (Lámh 2018) and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Continuing professional development activities were provided by the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme Consortium (LINC Consortium 2016-2018); Childcare Committees; Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA) (MCA 2018); Tusla (Tusla 2018); higher education institutions and providers of Level 5 and Level 6 programmes.


Similarly in reporting on CPD activities related to autism, a chequered pattern emerged with participants reporting attending conferences; engaging in autism-specific workshops; one-day programmes; short programmes; modules on autism in the context of IPE and CPD programmes (face-to-face; online and blended); special needs assistant programmes at Level 5 on the NFQ (QQI 2018); autism-specific undergraduate diplomas; post-graduate and Master's programmes. The focus of CPD activities varied and included communication; speech and language; behaviour; sensory issues and sleep; specific intervention approaches (the Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children (TEACCH) approach (Schopler, Mesibov and Hearsey 1995); the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) (Bondy and Frost 2011); and Applied Behaviour Analysis (Alberto and Troutman 2013). As for the area of inclusion, CPD opportunities were provided by a wide variety of providers including MCA (MCA 2018); the Special Education Support Service (SESS) (National Council for Special Education (NCSE) 2018); Early Childhood Ireland (ECI 2018); AsIAM (AsIAM 2018); higher education institutions and providers of Level 5 and Level 6 programmes.



It was clear that participants in the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* brought a wealth of prior learning and experience to the programme, which manifested itself in a commitment to inclusion as encapsulated by an early childhood teacher at Aibreann who remarked that: *'this is my thirty-second year teaching and I have always had children with additional needs and a lot of what I'm doing has been hard learned'* (A2). However, the present data clearly reflects the impact of the absence of a CPD infrastructure on the potpourri evident in terms of structure, content and providers of CPD for staff working with autistic children in early childhood settings.

### **Participants' Motivations for Undertaking the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme**

Analysis of the data suggests that participants' principal motivations for undertaking the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*, was to better understand and learn more about autism; to become familiar with current best practice; to support autistic children and their families; to ensure autistic children are fully included in educational settings and to receive general practical guidance. Many participants referred to having autistic children in the ELC setting and as pointed out by an early childhood teacher: *'it's so prevalent and I just said, with the children that are coming in, I'd like to be in the best position I can be to try and look after them as best I can'* (A3). The commitment of participants in electing to undertake the programme voluntarily was underpinned by a concern to improve their capacity to include autistic children: *'well, I believe that it's constant and never ending improvement and we're always looking at ways of improving and saying what we can do differently'* (A2). Many of the pre-programme questionnaire participants understood their role in including children with autism in the early years setting and this prompted them to participate in the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*: *'...to learn more about how to help and include children with autism in our setting as we are seeing more and more children with this'*.



The need to build professional knowledge and confidence in relation to autism was a major consideration for the educators participating in the programme. Some participants' responses to the questionnaires indicated that presently, they felt unprepared for supporting the learning and developmental needs of children with autism in their settings: *'I feel like with the way the system is now, I am unprepared for dealing with children with autism in my setting'*. Some expressed a desire for *'a very practical course'*, to *'gain ideas and strategies'*, to *'gain new knowledge and understanding'*, and to be *'better equipped to ... help manage their [children's] transitions to primary school'*. Overall, early childhood teachers requested professional knowledge and strategies that could be implemented in their educational setting.

All participants were united by a desire to build positive supportive relationships with the extended family unit, in general, and with children, in particular: *'that we are all together to support each other and not that the parents are on their own'* (A3). An early childhood teacher at Réalt pointed out that *'I think that's it's really important for the child to reach their full potential so really, like to get that really we need changes in the partnership with parents so I feel that's very important'* (R2). Relationships with young children are at the heart of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) 2009) and participants' commitment to building relationships with children was often referred to. As noted by a participant: *'well for me, if you don't develop a relationship with the child, how can you expect the child to have a sense of belonging; have a sense of identity in the centre; how do you expect the child to make connections with others if you're not prepared to develop a relationship with the child and with their family'* (R1).

The need for professional guidance, knowledge and practical strategies can be related to the varying ways in which autism was understood by participants prior to undertaking the *Teach Me AsIAm Early Years Programme*.

A number of participants defined autism in terms of a communication difficulty, such as: 'communication problems', 'struggles to communicate', 'difficulty in communicating', and 'affects a child's communication and social interaction'. There was little reference to autism as a spectrum and autism was understood by some as a learning difficulty, complex and associated with challenging behaviours: 'a very complex learning difficulty' and 'a child's learning and development may or may not be severely impacted...' The word cloud below from Location B captures this pre-programme understanding.



Figure 12. Pre-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location B

The need for inclusive strategies was strongly represented across the views expressed by educators. These ranged from desires to 'learn some strategies to include children with autism into the everyday activities within the setting', to having 'a better understanding of how to include children with autism' and wanting 'to learn how to integrate an autistic child into my setting successfully'. Overall, early childhood teachers requested approaches to help include children with autism "to be a part of their class' rather than being 'on the outside so that the child can 'benefit fully in the setting'.



## Programme Effectiveness

The post-programme questionnaire distributed to participants following completion of Day Two of the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme centred on evaluating participants' learning from the programme and the extent to which their expectations in relation to the programme has been met. Initially 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 7, 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.

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	29	11.2%	230	88.8%	259

Post-programme questionnaires indicated a clear increase in participating educators' knowledge, confidence and expertise in providing for autistic children. Overall, the programme seems to have given participants: *'more confidence with autism'*.

The evaluation was focused specifically on establishing the impact of the programme on participants' knowledge(s); practices and skills in providing for autistic children in the early years (Urban et al. 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). Each of these areas are reported on below in terms of the findings that emerged from the research.

### Programme Effectiveness: Knowledge(s)

All participants in the survey were either 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* content as summarised in Table 8 below.

Specific reference was made by participants in relation 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 8. Participants' Satisfaction with the Content of the Teach Me As I am Programme**

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	32	12.4%	227	87.6%	259

The emphasis questionnaire participants placed on the breadth and depth in which relevant topics were covered, was corroborated by interview participants and most likely contributed to these high satisfaction rates. 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'*. Post-programme questionnaire responses indicated a more a specific, detailed and positive understanding of autism, whereby the child *'understands the world in a different way and deals with situations differently'*. Participants commented that the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* explored autism fully by first explaining; *'why children with ASD ... might do what they do'* and then offering *'strategies to support their participation and to deal with particular behaviour'*. Overall, post-programme questionnaire results indicated that educators had *"a better understanding of the characteristics associated with autism"*. This appears to be influenced by in the increase in knowledge, skills and confidence respondents perceive they have due to increased knowledge and skills in the area, which positively impacts on both the child and their family.

A recurring observation participants noted in relation to programme was the importance of cultivating empathy in providing effectively for autistic children as captured by the one of the interview participants: *'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). Questionnaire participants further corroborated this concept of empathy as observed by one of the participants: 'this programme is the epitome of "walk a mile in my shoes"... It turns all theory around ... and affords us a new insight into how we can support and adapt to the needs of a child with autism'.*

Consonant with the principles of *Aistear: The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework* (NCCA 2009), participants consistently referred to espousing a child-led concept of pedagogy and curriculum underpinned by a concern to provide enriched experiences that allow each child to reach his/her potential, as captured by two of the interview participants: *'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 individual approach was evident during the exploring and telling activity, where each child was supported in pursuing her interests. The word clouds captured the shift in thinking from a deficit-model to a more strengths-based individualised way of thinking as evidenced in the word clouds at Figure 13 and 14 from Location C.



Figure 13. Pre-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location C



Figure 14. Post-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location C.

This child-led concept of pedagogy and curriculum are captured in the video-stills below from Réalt at Figure 15, where the potential of the concept in engaging the child is evident. Initially Jane selected to play with the jigsaw independently based on her current interest in both colours and the letters of the alphabet. This was facilitated by the early childhood teacher and two other children in the setting voluntarily joined in the activity, which was scaffolded by the early childhood teacher and effectively promoted both Jane’s engagement and social interaction.

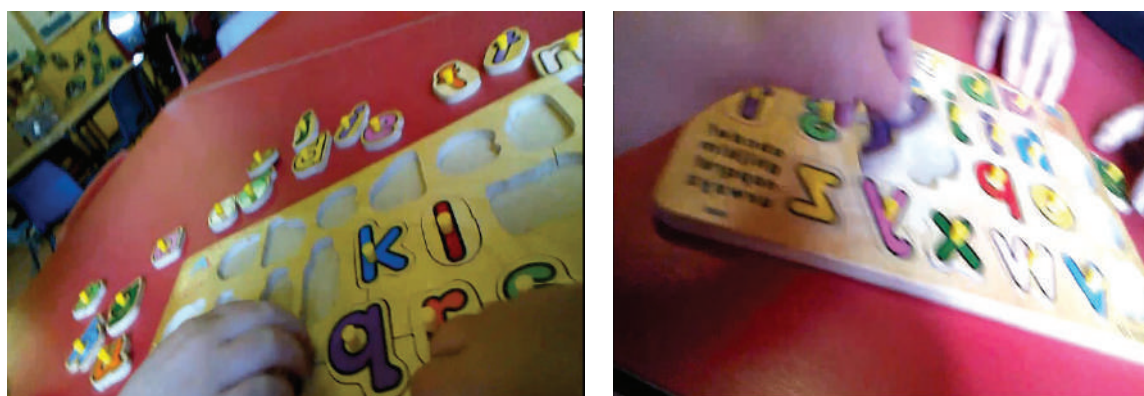



Figure 15. A Child-Led Concept of Curriculum and Pedagogy

The importance of the directing attention to the physical, temporal and interactional environments for autistic children was reflected across the data. Participants' attention to the environment variously reflected the learning on the programme; participants prior knowledge of Reggio-Emilia's concept of the environment as the third-teacher and Maria Montessori's belief in providing a prepared environment to support children's independence (Montessori 1966; Edwards, Gandini and Forman 2012; Ring 2018). The concept of the environment as the third teacher was introduced by Loris Malaguzzi, the founder of the Reggio-Emilia approach, who suggested that the the environment in early years settings should be viewed as the 'third teacher' after the adults and the children themselves (Gandini 2012). Across the data and during exploring and telling activities, the role of both the outdoor and indoor environments in supporting autistic children's participation was evident as illustrated in Figure 16 below.



Figure 16. The Concept of the Environment as the Third Teacher

Participants 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, overstimulating 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, come back to basics'* (R3).



Participants understanding of the temporal environment is encapsulated by the early childhood teacher at Réalt's observation; *'the visuals, I would find them very significant for children with autism, it helps them put a picture in their minds of the routine or what's coming next and also the structure helps them predict the events and let them be able to organise their time and their expectations'* (R3). However participants also adopted a critical child-led approach: *'and the routine as well, so yeah I think it just depends for each child. Like some child, pictures might not necessarily apply to them or they might find something else but literally you need to look at each child individually and that's what works best'*.

Finally participants referred to the importance of interacting appropriately with the child based on each child's unique differences: *'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 them 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).

Positive relationships between parents and the early years' setting play a pivotal role in a child's identity formation and sense of belonging (Daly et al. 2016; O'Byrne 2018) and participants reported that the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* provided information that not only supported the child with autism but their parents also. For example, one questionnaire participant commented that the programme was: *'very informative, given great knowledge and advice for not only supporting the child but also supporting parents'*. Similarly, another stated the programme provided strategies that will allow the setting to help both the child and their parents *'and to be an advocate for them'*. Specific reference was made to the Tutor's focus on supporting participants in building positive and collaborative relationships with parents: *'the language. She gave lovely language and I wrote it all down on a notepad and I have it if some day it does come up that it's kind of my responsibility to have that conversation...and you know the sandwich effect, you know the good, the little need, and the positive again and then just to reiterate that we're all in this together, I'm here to support your child'*. (A3).

Questionnaire participants reported feeling *'very positive'* after the first session, feeling *'more confident about the approaches I already am using, that I am on the right track'*. This was reiterated by interview participants who observed that: *'we were already including children with autism in our setting and have done for twenty-one years but what it did for us was it affirmed our approach'* (R2). However participants also reported that the programme replaced misconceptions about autism, as noted by a questionnaire participant: *'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 that she had previously misunderstood the position of 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'*.

### 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.

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	1	.4%	49	18.9%	209	80.7%	259

Qualitative responses in 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.

The practical element of the programme was welcomed as many felt that previous CPD experiences had not provided the in-depth knowledge to support educators' needs in effectively meeting the needs of autistic children in the early years.

During exploring and telling activities, early childhood educators were observed to consider the implications of the differences in social interaction; language and communication; flexibility of thought and behaviour and sensory responsivity experienced by children with autism. In Figure 17 below, a wide range of sensory experiences was available for children in the ELC settings, which promoted sensory equilibrium and supported social interaction and communication with other children in the settings (Feeney 2018). At Réalt, Jane had a wide range of attractive sensory objects available and at Aibreann, sand play provided an opportunity for Kate to engage in sensory exploration. In accordance with the principles of participatory research underpinning the evaluation, the researcher also participated in this activity.

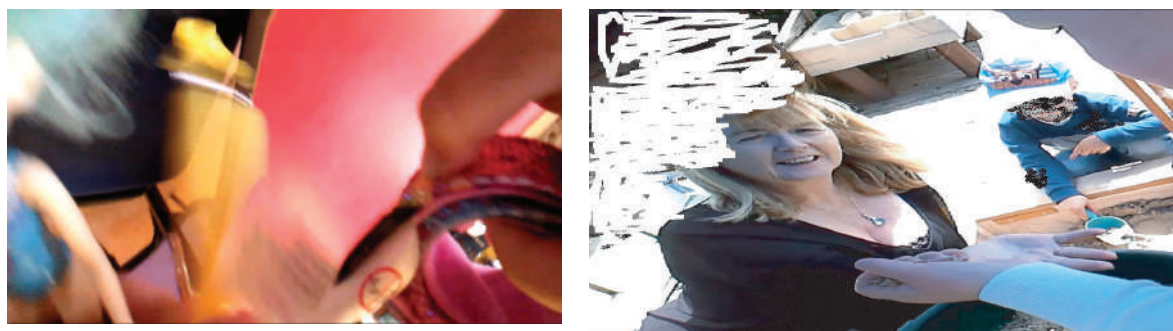


Figure 17 . Practices Captured during Exploring and Telling

### **Programme Effectiveness: Values**

As observed in the literature review, values are reflected in the pedagogy we adopt as early childhood teachers in terms of our theoretical perspectives about how children learn and develop and our 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 educators' beliefs about the autism and be aligned with *Early Childhood*



Care and Education National Inclusion Charter (DCYA 2016) summarised previously at Figure 5.

Questionnaire participants were asked to give an overall indication as to how well they felt the *Teach Me As I Am m Early Years Programme* prepared them to work with an autistic child in the future. As illustrated in Table 11, participants felt that the programme either prepared them ‘well’ or ‘very well’ to meet the needs of an autistic child. This reflected 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.

<b>Table 11. Participants’ Perspectives on how the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme Prepared them for Providing for an Autistic Child in the Early Learning and Care Service</b>											
	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Well		Very Well		Total
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	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.

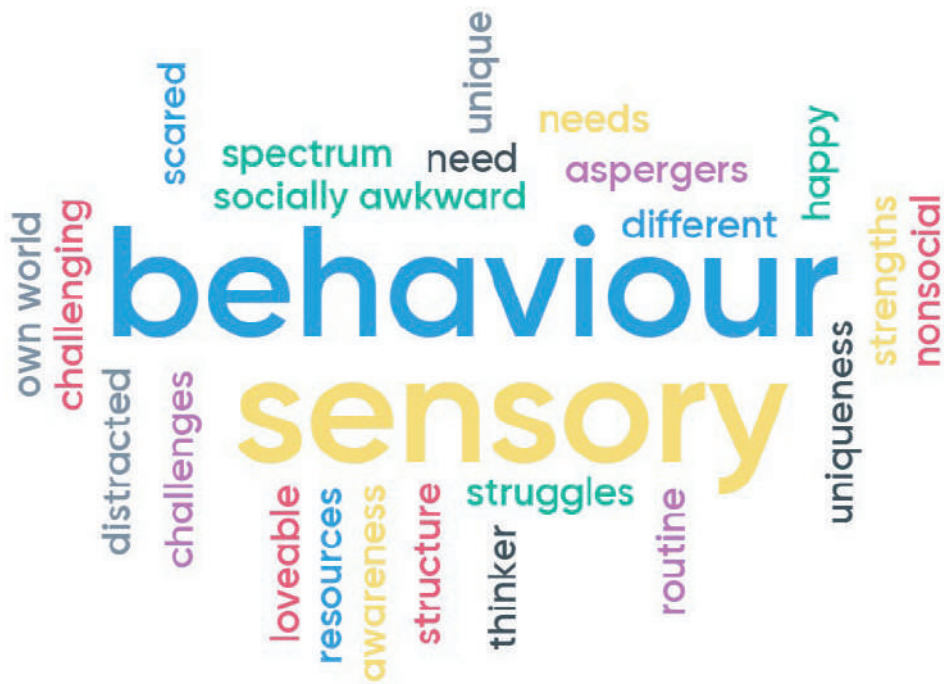


Figure 18. Pre-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location D



Figure 19 Post-Programme Word Cloud from Participants at Location D

As noted previously, participants articulated a child-led philosophy and children were viewed as active participants in their own learning and development and their views valued and responded to (United Nations 1989; Lundy 2007; Ring and O’Sullivan 2016; Daly 2018). A key element in including children’s voices was actively listening to children, observation and planning as summarised 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 role of observation and assessment in supporting children’s outcomes is well-documented in the research (Dunleavy-Lavin, Heaney and Skehill 2018; Ryan 2018).


## 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 Early Years Programme* as summarised in Table 12. below.

	Very Dissatisfied		Dissatisfied		Neutral		Satisfied		Very Satisfied		Total
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	
<b>Overall Satisfaction</b>	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	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’*. One questionnaire participant commented that *‘you are really put in the shoes of the child and see if from their point of view’*.


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 teachers at Aibreann:



*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); 'I found first of all the fact that (the tutor) had Asperger's or autism or whatever phrase you want to use. And that her daughter has and how she manages it. There was a great connect then' (A2) and (referring to the tutor): 'I just thought it was incredible, I couldn't believe it' (A3).*

Participants were also asked to share any ideas which they had in relation to improving the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years 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 early childhood care and education services, many respondents' articulated the challenges experienced around attending CPD activities and sourcing relief staff for their services. Some suggestions made included that substitution in the setting would be paid for by the programme or through alternative CPD funding or that the programme could be organised outside of contact time, as summarised by one participant: *'perhaps some of the training could be delivered on evenings/weekends/out of term time. Taking time off work without pay or trying to find cover could prevent early years teachers from participating'*.



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 Early Years 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'*. There were many recommendations in terms of future roll-out of the programme such as making the programme available for all preschool educators and for those working in primary school contexts as teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) as captured by one questionnaire participant: *'the programme could be open to all preschools, staff and national schools, advertise to the public, make them aware of the programme'*. Many respondents felt that it would be beneficial to *'provide the training programme to parents as well'*.

Interestingly, a number of participants suggested that an onsite visit from AsIAm personnel would assist participants in consolidating their learning on the programme: *'have someone visit the service to give hands on guidance'*. On-site observation and mentoring has previously been identified as a key component of effective CPD programmes (Guskey 2002; Whitebread et al., 2015).

The interactive way the programme was delivered was also 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 findings, which have emerged from the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme are encouraging in terms of the overall levels of satisfaction with the programme and with specific aspects related to developing early childhood teachers' knowledge(s); practices and values to enable them to provide effectively for autistic children (Urban et al. 2011; Ring, O'Sullivan and Wall 2018). The programme was successful in meeting participants' expectations with particular features of the programme, including the expertise of the programme tutor; opportunities to explore the concept of autism in meaningful contexts related to ELC settings; the programme's practical and applied focus and the emphasis on promoting parent and family collaborative learning identified as contributing significantly to its overall effectiveness.

These features identified by the participants resonate with research on quality which emphasises the importance of CPD programmes that provoke active participation; focus on theory and its application and provide opportunities for feedback and reflection (Whitebread, Kuvalja and O'Connor 2015). However the evaluation highlights that currently in Ireland, the ECEC PEC is in a state of flux and points to an urgent need to restructure IPE in ECEC to ensure all graduates are provided with opportunities to support them in accommodating diverse learners both in theory and practice. Critically the evaluation has highlighted the importance of establishing a CPD Infrastructure that provides opportunities for early childhood teachers to access CPD as a coherent process rather than the current CPD potpourri reported in this research. Importantly the evaluation has unequivocally identified a need for educators working in the early years to have access to high quality CPD in order to enable them to provide effectively for autistic children at this crucial phase in their lives. The evaluation has further highlighted the central role of parents in their children's ELC provision and the possibility of allowing parents access the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* should be considered. The implications of the evaluation findings for future policy and practice will be discussed further in the final chapter.

### Introduction

The aim of the evaluation of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* was to ascertain whether participation in the programme impacted on early childhood teachers' capacity to effectively include autistic children in early childhood settings. Cognisant that a range of differential knowledge(s), practices and values has been identified as being effective in providing effectively for autistic children (Jordan, Jones and Murray 1998; Egan 2018; Fitzgerald 2018; Long 2018), the evaluation was concerned to establish the impact of the programme on early childhood teachers' knowledge(s); practices and values (Urban et al. 2011; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). While this was a small-scale evaluation with a limited time frame and conducted within a limited time frame, a range of valuable findings emerged, which has the potential to both inform policy development in relation to the professional education continuum (PEC) for early childhood teachers and contribute to future research. A summary of the evaluation findings and the associated implications for policy and practice related to the knowledge(s); practices and values necessary to provide high-quality early learning and care (ELC) for autistic children are considered in this chapter.



## The Professional Education Continuum for Early Childhood Teachers

The evaluation findings reflect the current lack of clarity in relation to the identified knowledge(s); practices and values necessary for providing for children with diverse abilities at initial professional education (IPE) level in Ireland, with research participants reporting a wide range of experiences in their IPE level and little input or practicum experience in relation to providing for autistic children (Fillis 2018). In restructuring the PEC for early childhood teachers, it is essential that attention is directed to ensuring that at IPE level, there is a recognition of the counter-intuitive leap necessary to provide effectively for autistic children. The centrality of providing students at IPE level with practicum experiences in providing for children with diverse abilities requires consideration vis-à-vis the role of deliberate practice augmented by reflection and mentoring in achieving mastery (Erisson and Towne 2010).

The continuing professional development (CPD) potpourri, which emerged indicated a lack of a systemic CPD infrastructure. Participants reported accessing CPD in order to effectively provide for an autistic child who had enrolled in a setting. Grundy and Robison (2004) identify the three principal functions of CPD as extension, renewal and growth, which should be driven by both systemic and personal needs. The commitment of participants to providing effectively for autistic children in the evaluation is unequivocal, however the lack of a CPD infrastructure is contributing to the potpourri of CPD experiences reported by participants and impacting negatively on CPD achieving its overall functions in a cohesive manner.

### Programme Effectiveness: Knowledge(s): Practices and Values

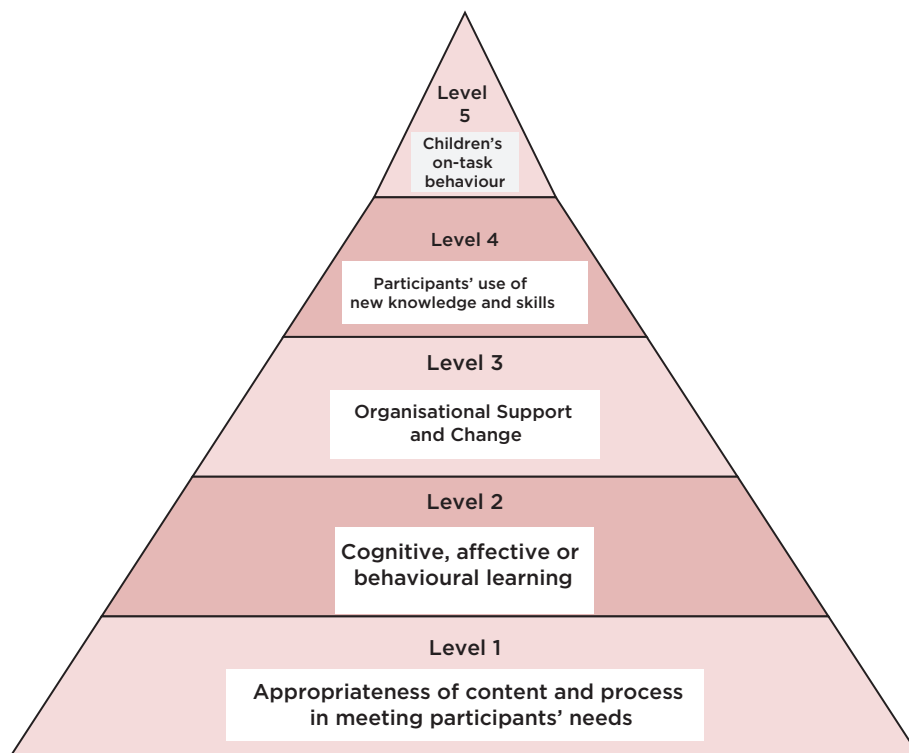
The evaluation findings confirm the positive impact of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* on providing participants with the differential knowledge(s); practices and values identified as being essential in providing for autistic children (Ring, Daly and Wall 2018).





However the time frame of the research did not allow for isolating complexities such as individual participants' prior experiences and expertise; capability; personal and professional biographies; contextual; emotional and psychological factors and the heterogeneous needs of children (Day and Sachs 2004; Guskey 2009). It follows that a CPD programme will impact differently on each individual and therefore identifying a universal truth applicable to all is unfeasible (Guskey 1995). In applying the model suggested by Guskey (2002) at Figure 20 below for evaluating the impact of the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*, the data-analysis can confirm evidence of the appropriateness of the content and process in meeting participants' needs; point to positive indicators of cognitive, affective and behavioural learning; organisational support and change; participants' use of new knowledge and skills and children's on-task behaviour. However this evidence is almost exclusively reliant on self-reporting, which while valuable, should be augmented by a greater focus on observation of practice and children's outcomes in future evaluations of the programme.






The positive findings suggest that all early childhood educators should have access to the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* in addition to those personnel providing support for early years settings in the context of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) (AIM 2016). Consideration should also be given to providing parents with access to the programme in view of the importance of collaborative and ongoing dialogue between parents and early childhood settings in optimising children's outcomes (O'Byrne 2018).

### Programme Organisation

The high levels of satisfaction with the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* can be linked to the initial questionnaire distributed to early childhood teachers and parents, which ascertained areas that should be included in the programme.



From the outset therefore, the programme was focused on being responsive to both the early childhood teacher's practice in the ELC service and to parents' experiences. Additionally the success of the programme can be associated with the tutor's experience as being autistic and having a child with autism and her identified ability to connect with participants. The use of interactive learning methodologies; discussion and collaborative learning during sessions further contributed to participants' satisfaction with the programme. Conscious however that providing access for all early childhood teachers to the programme in its current format would not be possible, it is suggested that consideration is given to exploring a range of delivery modes to include blended and on-line formats. This would facilitate a more flexible mode of delivery and alleviate the difficulties identified in sourcing substitute staff while participants attend the CPD sessions.

Linked to the identified need for a CPD infrastructure, consideration should be given to accrediting the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* as an element in a suite of recognised CPD programmes.

## Conclusion

While acknowledging the complexity of evaluating the impact of CPD across all of the levels suggested by Guskey (2002) above, Guskey (2009) observes that 'no improvement effort in the history of education has ever succeeded in education settings without thoughtfully planned and well-implemented professional development activities designed to enhance educators' knowledge and skills' (p. 226).

Taking into account the inevitable limitations of research on evaluating CPD, which have been repeatedly articulated throughout the report, the findings from this evaluation suggest that the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* has impacted positively on participants' knowledge(s); practices and values in providing for autistic children in the early years.

The evaluation clearly indicates the need for early childhood educators to understand the counter-intuitive leap necessary in order to provide effectively for autistic children in the early years (Ring, Daly and Wall 2018). Given the increase in the prevalence of autism, it is important therefore that the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme* continues to be available to all early childhood educators and that consideration is given to exploring other modes of delivery, such as blended or online formats. Continuing to support ELC services through combining support from personnel who have broader perspectives and educators who have critical site-based knowledge is also essential (Guskey 2003). While a number of participants suggested that an onsite visit from AsIAm personnel would be beneficial in consolidating their learning on the programme: *'have someone visit the service for to give hands on guidance'*, it is suggested that the AIM provides a more appropriate and robust structure for this process (AIM 2016). In order to begin with a shared understanding, however it is suggested that all personnel providing support for ELC services should be provided with the opportunity to undertake the *Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*.

Finally, the evaluation has highlighted the importance of restructuring IPE for early childhood teachers to ensure all undergraduates have both theoretical and practical experience in providing for children with diverse abilities. Critically the evaluation points to the need for a CPD infrastructure in order to elevate CPD for early childhood teachers *'to an inquiry-based profession rather than a haphazard set of activities based on intuition, hearsay, tradition and folklore'* (Guskey 2009: p. 232). Finally, while the evaluation has highlighted the importance of continuing to evaluate the impact of CPD across all of the levels suggested by Guskey (2002), it is critical that we continue to accrue authentic evidence on the ultimate goal of CPD, which is optimising children's outcomes.



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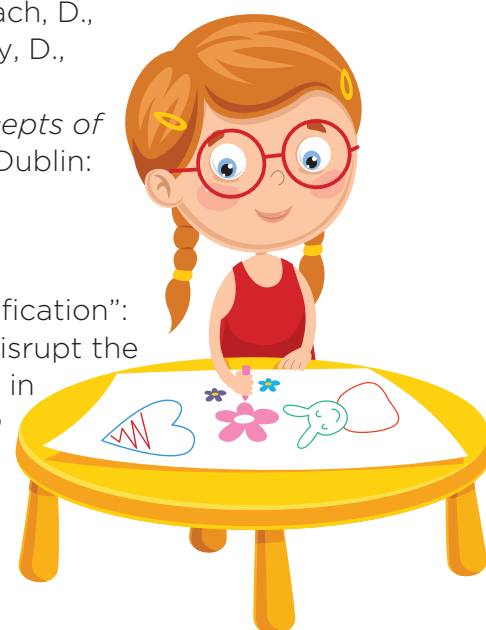
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**1. What level of experience do you have in working with children with autism?**

- Very experienced
- Somewhat experienced
- No experience

**2. Have you engaged with previous training surrounding the area of autism?**

- Yes
- No

**3. If yes, how useful did you find this training?**

- Very useful
- Somewhat useful
- Not useful
- Not applicable

**4. What is your title of employment within the early years sector?**

- Owner/Manager
- Room Leader
- Childcare Assistant
- AIM Support/SNA
- Other

**5. Are you or your early years setting currently in receipt of, or have you previously been in receipt of Access and Inclusion Model Supports?**

- Yes
- No
- Awaiting Approval
- N/A



**6. Would you be interested in availing of a training course on autism spectrum disorders?**

- Yes
- No
- Unsure

**7. Are there any areas surrounding autism spectrum disorder that you would be particularly interested in learning about?**

**1. Is your child with a diagnosis of autism**

- Under 5 years old?
- Between 5 and 10 years old?
- Between 10 and 15 years old?
- 15 years or older?

**2. Did your child avail of, or are they currently availing of any of the following pre- school support systems?**

- Autism Preschool Unit (through Department of Education)
- Autism Preschool Unit (through Home Tuition Grant)
- Early Intervention Unit/Special School
- ECCE Mainstream Preschool with AIM Support/SNA
- ECCE Mainstream Preschool with no additional support
- Home Tuition

Other (please specify)

**3. How supported did/do you feel during your partnership with your child's early years educators?**

- Very supported
- Somewhat supported
- Unsupported
- Unsure

**4. What recommendations do you have for ways in which you could be/could have been further supported during your child's early years education?**

**5. What areas of training, if any, do you feel that early years educators could benefit from to assist children with autism during the pre-school years?**

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the respondent to provide their answer to the question above.



**1. consent to taking part in this survey. Please tick the appropriate box:**

Yes

No

**2. Indicate the type of setting you are currently working in:**

Community-Based

Private

Setting based in a Primary School

**3. How you would describe your setting:**

Full Day

Sessional

Other

If you have indicated 'Other' above, please describe briefly below:

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**4. How would you would classify your setting:**

Urban

Rural

**5. Please indicate your most recent level of qualification in early childhood care and education:**

Level 5

Level 6

Level 7

Level 8

Level 9

Level 10



**6. Have you previously engaged in continuing professional learning (CPL) in the area of inclusion?**

Yes

No

If your answer to this question is 'Yes', please describe briefly the CPL programme (s):

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**7. Have you previously engaged in continuing professional learning (CPL) in the area of autism?**

Yes

No

If your answer to this question is 'Yes', please describe briefly the CPL programme (s):

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**8. Indicate briefly why you are undertaking the 'Teach me AsIAm Early Years Programme' continuing professional learning (CPL) programme:**

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**9. Based on your experience to date, please complete the following sentences:**

*I understand autism as...*

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*In including a child with autism in my setting, I need to be aware of...*

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**10. What do you hope to learn from this continuing professional learning programme?**

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**11. In order to ensure this continuing professional learning programme is meeting your needs, it is intended to follow-up on this survey with a visit to a number of settings. If you are interested in being involved in this phase of the research, we would be delighted if you could provide your contact details below:**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number: \_\_\_\_\_

E-Mail: \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for participating in the survey and we hope you enjoy the program**





**1. consent to taking part in this survey. Please tick the appropriate box:**

Yes

No

**2. Indicate the type of setting you are currently working in:**

Community-Based

Private

Setting based in a Primary School

**3. How you would describe your setting:**

Full Day

Sessional

Other

If you have indicated 'Other' above, please describe briefly below:

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**4. How would you would classify your setting:**

Urban

Rural

**5. Please indicate your most recent level of qualification in early childhood care and education:**

Level 5

Level 6

Level 7

Level 8

Level 9

Level 10

**6. Have you previously engaged in continuing professional learning (CPL) in the area of inclusion?**

Yes

No

If your answer to this question is 'Yes', please describe briefly the CPL programme (s):

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**7. Have you previously engaged in continuing professional learning (CPL) in the area of autism?**

Yes

No

If your answer to this question is 'Yes', please describe briefly the CPL programme (s):

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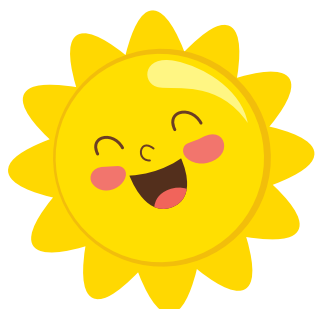
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**8. Having completed the 'Teach me AsIAm' continuing professional learning (CPL) programme. How do you feel about the programme overall?**

**Content :** Very Dissatisfied  Dissatisfied  Neutral  Satisfied   
Very Satisfied

Can you briefly tell us why you feel this way about the programme overall?

**Based on your experience, how do you feel about each of the following aspects of the programme?**

*Content:* Very Dissatisfied  Dissatisfied  Neutral  Satisfied   
Very Satisfied

*Application to Practice:* Very Dissatisfied  Dissatisfied  Neutral   
Satisfied  Very Satisfied

*Tutor Support:* Very Dissatisfied  Dissatisfied  Neutral   
Satisfied  Very Satisfied



**10. How do you feel the programme prepared you for providing for a child with autism in your setting in the future?**

Very Poor     Poor     Neutral     Well     Very Well

Can you *briefly* tell us why you feel the programme prepared you in this way?

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**11. How might we improve the 'Teach me AslAm' programme in the future?**

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**12. Based on your experience of the 'Teach me AsIAm' programme, please complete the following sentences:**

*I understand autism as...*

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In including a child with autism in my setting, I need to be aware of...

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**Thank you for participating in the survey and we hope you enjoyed the programme.**



<b>Genesis of Decision to Apply for <i>Teach me As I Am</i> programme</b>
What prompted you to apply for the Teach me As I Am programme?
<b>Initial Professional Education and Continuing Professional Learning/Continuing Professional Development?</b>
Tell me about your initial professional education experience to date? Were there any particular elements of your initial professional education that you think equipped you to meet the learning and teaching needs of children with autism in the early years? What types of continuing professional learning programmes have you previously attended? What experiences prepared you most in including children with autism in your setting? Why do you think these experiences were particularly beneficial or not in enabling you to do your work?
<b>Concept of Early Years Education for Children with Autism</b>
Do you think that providing for children with autism in the early years is very different from providing for children who do not have autism? From your experience, what do you think are the critical elements of appropriate provision for children with autism in the early years?
<b>Experience of <i>Teach me As I Am</i> programme</b>
Do you think that the Teach me As I Am programme prepared you to provide for children with autism in your early years setting? Tell me how you believe the programme prepared you/or not to provide for children with autism in your setting? Do you believe that participating in the programme impacted positively on your own motivation? If so, can you identify specific ways that the programme impacted positively on your own motivation?
<b>Pedagogy and Assessment</b>
What specific approaches do you find useful in providing for children with autism in the early years? What prompts you to select a particular approach? What approaches do you find are most effective for children with autism in your setting? What teaching approaches do you find are least effective for children with autism in your setting? What methods of assessment do you use to capture the child's attainments?
<b>Parental Involvement</b>
Are parents/carers involved in their children's education programmes? Are there particular structures in place that facilitate parental involvement?
<b>Support Structures</b>
When you encounter a problem in meeting the needs of children with autism, who do you consult with initially? What kind of additional support structures in meeting the needs of children with autism do you have access to?
<b>Conclusion</b>
Is there any other aspect of your experience of providing for children with autistic spectrum disorders that you think is important and that hasn't been addressed in this interview?



