**Title of the Work:** THE TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL OF A SHORT CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL LEARNING (CPL) PROGRAMME FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD TEACHERS WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN IRISH PRE-SCHOOLS

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**Abstract**

The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) initiated by the Irish government in 2015 provides a model of supports designed to support children with diverse abilities accessing universal preschool education. The development of a qualified and competent workforce is seen as central to realising this model of inclusion (Inter-Departmental Group, 2015). Aligned with the view that inclusion rests upon the provision of a competent workforce, The Teach me AsIAm continuing professional learning (CPL) programme was developed by AsIAm (Ireland’s National Autism Organisation) to provide an Autism specific CPL opportunity for early childhood teachers. This paper reports on findings from an evaluation of this CPL programme. A mixed-methods approach was adopted to the evaluation which included the dissemination of a pre-programme and post-programme questionnaire, to programme participants. The questionnaire data suggests that participating early childhood teachers reported an increase in their capacity to include children with Autism, having completed the programme. This paper will present findings in relation to participant profiles, understanding of Autism, and expectations and satisfaction levels with the programme. Through presenting some evidence from the Irish context, this paper will contribute to the more widespread debate as to how early childhood teachers can be supported to provide an inclusive education for children with Autism.
Introduction

There has been very little research in Ireland about the experiences of early childhood teachers who work with children with Autism despite the fact that 1 in 65 (1.5%) of the school population now has an assessment of Autism (Ring, Daly & Wall, 2018). Individuals with Autism experience the world in a fundamentally different and diverse way than those who do not have autism (Grandin 1995; Harris 2018). It has been suggested that teachers must adapt their teaching in a manner that has been described as non-intuitive in order to support the learning of children with Autism (Jordan 2013; Ring, Daly and Wall 2018; Egan 2018). The professional competence of the early childhood teacher is consistently articulated as a reliable determinant of high quality early years education (Whitebread, Kuvalja & O’Connor, 2015; Ring, O’Sullivan & Wall, 2018). In relation to providing high-quality early years education for children with Autism, the importance of teachers accessing autism-specific CPL is highlighted in the literature (Ring, Daly & Wall, 2018). In the Irish context, there is currently little available in terms of CPL specifically focusing on developing the competences required to support the inclusion of children with Autism in the early years. In response to this gap, AsIAm, Ireland’s national Autism organisation developed and co-ordinated the delivery of a free programme across the country. Teach Me As I Am is an introductory CPL programme for early childhood teachers which focuses on the development of inclusive practices to support children with Autism and their families. AsIAm co-ordinated this programme across Ireland in 2018.

In 2010, the Irish government introduced the first universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) scheme which entitles every child to two years of state funded preschool education. There has been a 95% uptake of the scheme which allows children enroll when they are 3-years and to continue until the age of 5 ½ - years or until they begin primary school. One of the most welcome consequences of the scheme has been the entitlement for all children with diverse abilities to be accommodated in mainstream pre-school settings. This development while welcome, has placed considerable demands on early childhood teachers to include, fully, children with diverse abilities in their settings. In response to these challenges the Irish government launched the Better Start Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), which combines universal and targeted supports in advocating a child-centred and holistic.
approach to providing high-quality early intervention programmes for children with additional needs. As part of these universal supports, the Government provided €5.5 million in funding for a nationally delivered higher education programme, the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme. Graduates of the LINC programme are expected to assume the role and responsibilities of Inclusion Coordinator (InCo) in their early childhood settings (LINC Consortium, 2016-2018).

Since 2016, all staff working in early childhood education and care contexts in Ireland require a minimum of a Level 5 Certificate in childcare and all preschool team-leaders must hold a minimum of a Level 6 certificate in childcare. While qualifications in Ireland are now highly regulated, setting the minimum qualification at Level 5 belies the association between qualification level and quality provision (Whitebread, et al., 2015). Neither have these new measures gone far enough to address persisting problems relating to low status and poor remuneration for those working in early childhood education. While formal early childhood teacher qualifications are an important indicator of quality, the research also indicates CPL opportunities, particularly those which involve multiple workshops, classroom observations and opportunities for feedback and reflection, are particularly powerful in improving quality (Whitebread et al., 2015).

Early childhood teachers are now more qualified than ever and they can now avail of a range of CPL opportunities focused on developing competence in the area if inclusion. It is presently unclear, however, the extent to which early childhood teachers have access to content related specifically to working with children with Autism during initial teacher education (ITE) or continuing professional learning (CPL) programmes. AsIAm, was concerned to ensure that early childhood teachers, irrespective of prior learning, had the opportunity to engage in high quality CPL in the area of Autism. Prior to developing the programme, AsIAm initially consulted with 246 early childhood teachers to identify areas they would specifically like to see addressed in the programme, based on their experiences in early childhood settings.
The *Teach me AslAm Early Years* Continuing Professional Learning (CPL)

The *Teach me AslAm Early Years* Continuing Professional Learning (CPL) programme was designed and facilitated by AslAm’s Early Years Training Programme Coordinator, who has extensive expertise in the areas of Autism and early childhood education. As more children with Autism are now attending mainstream early childhood settings, the programme offered early childhood teachers an opportunity to: explore their concept of Autism, to identify the features of Autism, to challenge some common myths about the condition and to develop practical strategies which support the full inclusion and participation of children with Autism. The two day programme was rolled out nationally across 16 locations in Ireland in 2018. While Day 1 of the programme introduced new knowledge, ideas and strategies, Day 2 offered participants the opportunity to reflect back on how they had applied their new learning and to further expand on this learning. The programme is closely aligned with the principles underpinning *Aistear* (The Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework) and *Síolta* (*The Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education*), in promoting a strengths-based approach which encourages early childhood teachers to see children with Autism as confident and competent learners.

**Research Methodology**

Survey methodology was employed as part of a mixed methods evaluation of the *Teach me AslAm Early Years* programme. A pre- and post-programme questionnaire were designed to explore respondents behaviour, beliefs, knowledge and experiences (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). The questionnaire included a mix of forced-choice questions and open-ended questions which elicited information on respondents': educational background; working context; understanding of Autism; prior CPL in the areas of Inclusion and Autism; and satisfaction levels with *Teach Me Aslam Early Years Programme*.

311 early childhood teachers completed day 1 of the *Teach Me Aslam Early Years Programme* and 282 of these participants responded to the pre-programme questionnaire, giving a response rate of 90.7%. 272 early childhood teachers
completed day 2 of the programme leaving the attrition level at 12.5%. 259 participants responded to the post-programme questionnaire, giving a response rate of 95%. Given the high response rate on both days, the data collected can be considered representative of the perspectives of participants in the programme. The questionnaire generated both quantitative and qualitative data. Analysis of responses to forced-choice questions produced descriptive statistics in the form of frequencies and percentages. An emergent approach was taken to the analysis of responses to the open-ended questions. Each response was initially coded in terms of the main ideas expressed and the second stage of analysis involved using these initial codes to form broader themes (Mukherji & Albon, 2018). Ethical approval for this research was secured from the Mary Immaculate College Ethics Committee (MIREC). While the anonymous nature of the questionnaire reduced issues relating to confidentiality, anonymity and data storage and retention, consideration was given to issues relating to question design, voluntary participation and informed consent (Mukherji & Albon, 2018).

**Profile of Participants**

The patterns emerging in relation to qualifications resonate with the national trend of increasing levels of staff qualifications in the early years sector over the past decade. 83.4% (n=231) of respondents had attained qualifications at Level 6 or above. 40.8% (n= 113) of respondents had achieved a qualification at Level 7, 8 or 9 on the National Qualifications Framework. This pattern also reflects the recent changes in minimum qualifications requirements with preschool team-leaders now needing 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.

Early childhood teachers participating in programme were working across community (32.73%), private settings (56.12%) and those based in primary schools (11.15%). These findings affirm the diversity which exists in Ireland in terms of early years provision (Ring et al. 2016). Reflecting the national roll-out of the *Teach Me Aslam Early Years Programme*, 51.62% of respondents reported working in a rural setting and 48.38% in an urban setting.
Participants prior Participation in Continuing Professional Learning (CPL) in the Areas of Inclusion and Autism

A number of questions in the pre-programme questionnaire gathered data on respondents’ prior participation in CPL in the areas of Inclusion and Autism. While over half of respondents reported undertaking CPL in the area of inclusion (54%), only 26% reported undertaking CPL activities relating to Autism. A number of respondents reported undertaking CPL activities focused on specific needs of children with Autism including sensory issues, behaviour and communication, speech and language. Participants clearly brought a wealth of prior learning to the programme. The present data illustrates the diversity of CPL activities those working with young children with Autism in the early years participate in. 74% of participants, however, had not previously engaged in CPL specifically focused on teaching young children with Autism.

Participants Understanding of Autism

Autism was understood in various ways by participants. Some defined Autism in terms of 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, but 1 respondent described it as “a spectrum disorder with wide variations in abilities and issues”. Autism was understood by some as a learning difficulty: “a very complex learning difficulty” and “a child’s learning and development may or may not be severely impacted…” How Autism was understood by many participants was aligned more with a deficit view of Autism. This is in contrast to Ring and colleagues’ (2018), rejection of the term disorder in favour of difference, which clearly offers a more strengths-focused, child-centred and rights orientated conceptualisation of Autism.

Participants Expectations of the Programme

Some respondents felt unprepared for supporting the learning and development of children with Autism: “I feel like with the way the system is now, I am unprepared for dealing with children with autism in my setting”. Respondents expressed a desire for
“a very practical course”, to “gain ideas and strategies”, to “gain new knowledge and understanding”. The need for inclusive strategies was highlighted with respondents wishing to “learn some strategies to include children with autism into the everyday activities within the setting.”, and to have “a better understanding of how to include children with autism”. Overall, respondents were motivated to support the child with Autism “to be a part of their class” rather than being “on the outside” so that they can “benefit fully in the setting.” Participants clearly articulated the challenges to this goal due to a lack of practical guidance and support. Respondents also articulated the significance of the parents’ role in children’s education and expressed the need for “different techniques to support the child’s family”. Overall, results suggest that early years teachers, as articulated by 1 respondent, were eager to: “support children, parents and staff in developing the most effective programme of care and education at our service.”

**Participants’ Perspectives on the Effectiveness of the Programme**

Overall satisfaction levels with the programme were high with 11% reporting that they were ‘satisfied’ with the programme and 89% reporting that they were ‘very satisfied’ with the programme. To provide further information on how the programme met expectations, respondents were also asked how satisfied they were with aspects of the programme including programme content; application to practice and tutor support. All respondents were either ‘satisfied’ (12%) or ‘very satisfied’ (88%) with the programme content. The emphasis respondents placed on the breadth and depth in which relevant topics were covered, in the qualitative data, most likely contributed to these high satisfaction rates. As one respondent 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.” In terms of application to practice, the majority of respondents were ‘satisfied’ (19%) or ‘very satisfied’ (81%) with the programme and qualitative responses suggest that the emphasis placed on practical strategies was seen as particularly valuable. Developing new practice skills empowered participants to deliver a more inclusive educational experience for all children in their setting. All respondents were either ‘satisfied’ (4%) or ‘very satisfied’ (96%) with tutor support. In the qualitative responses respondents referred to the tutor’s “passion and knowledge”, described the tutor as “excellent” and “knowledgeable” and as someone
who “helped me to understand better from the child’s perspective how chaotic the world is”.

Respondents were asked to give an overall indication as to how well they felt the programme prepared them to work with a child with Autism in the future. Respondents felt that the programme either prepared them ‘well’ (25%) or ‘very well’ (75%) to meet the needs of a child with Autism. This is encouraging given that many respondents in the pre-programme questionnaire reported being ill-equipped to meet the learning and developmental needs of children with Autism.

**Improving the Delivery of the Teach Me AsIAm Early Years Programme**

Respondents were also asked to share any ideas which they had in relation to improving the Teach Me AsIAm Early Years Programme. Consistent with the descriptive data above, many respondents reported that they would not change anything about the programme e.g. “not sure the programme needs improving as I really enjoyed it!”. There were mixed views with regard to the timing of the sessions with some respondents indicating a preference for less time between the 2 CPL days while others felt that more time between the 2 days would have given more time to try out newly learnt strategies. Consistent with broader issues relating to non-contact time in early childhood services, many articulated the difficulties around attending CPL activities and sourcing relief staff for their services. Some suggested that a longer programme would allow for more extensive learning with some suggesting that it could be developed as an accredited programme. There were many recommendations in terms of future roll-out of the programme i.e. making the programme available for all early childhood teachers, for those working in primary schools as teachers and special needs assistants (SNA’s) and for parents. Interestingly, a number of respondents suggested that an onsite visit from AsIAm personnel would assist in consolidating learning on the programme. On-site observation and mentoring has previously been identified as a component of effective CPL programmes (Whitebread et al., 2015).

**Conclusions**

Questionnaire data suggests that programme participants were representative of the diversity which exists in Ireland, in terms of qualifications and provision. Participants
had varying prior experience of CPL in both the areas of inclusion and Autism with 74% reporting no prior engagement in Autism specific CPL. While participants had a wealth of prior knowledge and experience, they recognised their needs for further learning in this area in order to continue to develop high quality provision of children with Autism and their families. The results were most encouraging in terms of satisfaction levels with the programme and with specific aspects such as programme content, practical application and tutor support. While the descriptive data on programme effectiveness clearly indicates that participant expectations were met, the qualitative data provided valuable information in relation to the features of the Teach Me AsIAm Early Years Programme which contributed to its overall effectiveness. Respondents emphasised the expertise of the programme tutor, the opportunities to explore their concept of Autism, the emphasis on practical strategies for working with children with Autism and their families and the opportunities for feedback, reflection and collaborative learning. This resonates with the research on quality which emphasises the impact of CPL programmes which provoke active participation, a focus on theory and application, and opportunities for feedback and reflection (Whitebread et al., 2015). While increasing emphasis on Autism in ITE programmes is important in developing early childhood teacher competencies in the area if Autism, short CPL programmes such as Teach Me AsIAm can make a powerful contribution to practice when such programmes are accessible, evidence-based and responsive to learner needs.

References
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