Exploring the impact of an Autism Friendly Schools Initiative on staff understanding and practice

Laura Ambrose, Johanna Fitzgerald, Finn O Murchu and Elaine O'Keefe, Limerick, Ireland

Editorial comment

Many autistic children in Ireland and elsewhere attend schools where staff working with them may have limited access to information on autism and the adjustments that might help aid their learning and success. The national charity for autism (AsIAm) therefore developed an Autism Friendly Schools Initiative to provide information, professional development and a toolkit designed to evaluate and enhance practice within mainstream schools and special provision. The authors were funded by AsIAm to evaluate the value and impact of this initiative. It has now been used in over 100 schools over a three year period and there is a requirement that at least two staff members from each school take part.

A survey was designed to gain the views of the participants which included Likert scales and short open-ended questions on different aspects of the ASFI. A total of 31 participants (55 per cent) from year one completed the survey and their responses are presented in the paper. Participants particularly valued hearing directly from autistic people and made increased efforts to seek the voice of the autistic students they worked with. About half the participants valued the toolkit as a way of auditing whole school practice. Others did not comment and it may be that they had not found the time to engage sufficiently with this. The key message within the paper is that teaching staff are keen to learn more about autism and that ways need to be found to spread good practice throughout the whole school.

Address for correspondence
E-mail:
laura.ambrose@mic.ul.ie

Acknowledgements
The authors would like to thank AsIAm for commissioning this research. The research was enhanced by contributions from Adam Harris, CEO of AsIAm, alongside Hannah O'Dwyer and Billy Redmond of the Autism Friendly Schools Team. Gratitude is also extended to the participants who shared their experiences of the initiative.

Conflict of interest:
This project was supported by funding from AsIAm, Ireland's national autism charity which developed the Autism Friendly Schools Initiative (AFSI).

Introduction

AsIAm, Ireland's National Autism Charity, provides a range of services for members of the autism community; educational support for autistic people and their families, training opportunities for education professionals and service providers, advocacy and public awareness campaigns, alongside ongoing partnership with towns and communities in developing autism friendly public spaces and community settings (AsIAm, 2021). Their range of training opportunities focus on equipping educators, health professionals, business owners and community members with knowledge of autism and an awareness of how best to support autistic individuals (AsIAm, 2021).

The Autism Friendly Schools Initiative (AFSI), developed by AsIAm, is a nation-wide professional learning programme which supports schools in their provision of inclusive education for autistic learners. The AFSI aims to enhance teacher capacity to support autistic learners in mainstream and inclusive settings, to support teachers in establishing collaborative practices in inclusive education, and to provide schools with a strategic means of evaluating their provision of inclusive education for autistic learners. Within the Irish context, recommendations spanning the last two decades highlight the ongoing need for high quality, autism specific professional learning opportunities for teachers (Daly, Ring et al., 2016; DES, 2011; DES Inspectorate, 2006), to enhance school-wide, inclusive education practices and embed such practices within the school culture (Banks, McCoy et al., 2016).

The Department of Education Inspectorate (2020) highlighted the need to implement teaching and learning practices which effectively meet the needs of autistic learners. The AFSI was developed to meet the ongoing need in this area. It aims to enhance autism awareness and understanding among participating schools, and to support schools in identifying meaningful and necessary changes in the delivery of inclusive education for autistic learners. At the time of writing, AFSI has been implemented in over 100 schools across three years. It is a multi-year initiative, with participating schools having the option to complete between one and three years of the initiative. Notably, all participating schools are required to nominate two staff members for AFSI, with a recommendation that one of the participants be a member of the school leadership team.

Inclusive education for autistic students in Ireland

In Ireland, the Department of Education promotes an inclusive approach to education, where all students are educated within an inclusive whole school framework which supports effective teaching and learning for all students (Government of Ireland (GOI), 2022). The Education for Persons with Special Education Needs (EPSEN) Act (2004) states that students with additional learning needs should be educated in an inclusive environment, with this inclusive educational provision existing along a continuum. Within this continuum of provision, students may be educated in mainstream primary or post-primary settings, while accessing additional supports; a special class for students who experience difficulty with accessing the curriculum in the mainstream setting; or a special school which caters to the needs of students with more complex special educational needs.

Overview of Autism Friendly Schools Initiative (AFSI)

The AFSI is informed by the Middletown Framework for Inclusion (National Council for Special Education (NCSE), 2016). This framework for best practice of educational provision for autistic learners, embedded within the AFSI, focuses on the following themes:

- teaching and learning;
- inclusive school culture;
- leadership and management; and
- staff professional development.

The AFSI comprises two main components; participation in live professional learning sessions and engagement with an online self-evaluation Autism Friendly Schools Toolkit. Professional learning sessions include presentations on current theory and literature on the topic of autism education, presentations from experts in the field of autism education, and presentations from autistic young people. To support the development of communities of practice, these sessions also involve facilitation of dialogue among participants. The online Toolkit was developed in collaboration with multiple agencies and organisations and consists of a self-evaluation survey of 55 questions, intended to facilitate reflection and dialogue within schools regarding current strengths and challenges in the provision of inclusive education for autistic learners. The reflective process aligns with and complements the School Self-Evaluation process (Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate, 2016) and integrates key benchmarks for effective and highly effective practice espoused in the Looking At Our Schools Framework (DES Inspectorate 2016; Department of Education Inspectorate, 2022) as it relates to inclusive education for autistic students. The Looking At Our Schools (LAOS) Framework and School Self-Evaluation process (DES Inspectorate, 2016a; 2016b; 2022a; 2022b) provide primary and post-primary schools with a systematic approach to self-evaluating teaching,

learning, leadership, and management practices. A key goal of the LAOS framework is to enable teachers to identify current strengths and needs, and to create a focus for capacity building and subsequent engagement in professional learning.

A desired component of engagement with the AFSI is the allocation within each school of sufficient time to gain perspectives of staff, learners and parents when engaging with the Toolkit. It is organised into four themes, corresponding with the Middletown Framework for Inclusion; Teaching and Learning, Inclusive School Culture, School Management and Staff Development. Each theme includes performance indicators by which participants are encouraged to reflect on and identify their current practice as 'enhanced', 'established', 'developed', 'developing', or 'not appropriate'. The online Toolkit is responsive, in that it suggests potential evidence-based, action items based on progress relating to the performance indicator. These action items support participants in reflecting on and discussing potential next steps towards improving practice. *Table 1* illustrates these components under the 'Teaching and Learning' theme of the Toolkit.

The development and implementation of the AFSI is reflective of the 'Saturation Model' of inclusive education for autistic learners developed by Morewood, Humphrey and Symes (2011). This model proposes that inclusion is best attained when inclusive values and practices are embedded within and across all aspects of school life, wherein all members of the school community demonstrate autism understanding and awareness. A core feature of the Saturation Model is the *'agent of change'*, a central figure within the school who can impact upon beliefs and values across the school community and encourage autism awareness across the school. Within the AFSI, the two participants from each school share the role of change agent within their school community. Other core features of the Saturation Model embodied by the AFSI include creating a positive and autism-friendly ethos within the school, ensuring appropriate training and professional development opportunities for staff, and providing direct support and intervention for learners.

Programme content

Participants in AFSI attend live professional learning sessions which incorporate three strands; Voices from the Community; Engagement with the Toolkit; and Resources and Strategies.

Voices from the community

Within this strand, autistic young people share their perspectives on a range of key considerations for educators, such as the importance of parental partnership and consultation with the autistic community, suggestions for how best to create a school culture which is inclusive of the autistic community, barriers and supports to inclusive education which are experienced by autistic students currently, alongside an emphasis on the impact of peer acceptance and non-acceptance on the educational experience of autistic students.

Table 1: AFSI Toolkit section on Teaching and Learning for older learners

Teaching and Learning		
Performance Indicator	**Progress**	**Action item**
Our school has a strength-based attitude towards personal development as well as academic performance. Individual interests and personal career pathways are explored and encouraged when creating a development plan. An emphasis on the development of wellbeing, sexual health and the development of practical life skills are key priorities.	Not yet developed	Early opportunities to explore and encourage vocational preparation through life skills work and possible visits to different work environments as part of their life skills work. Finding opportunities to make connections with autistic adults in the working world.

Resources and strategies

This strand introduces participants to key conversations in the field of autism education, including an introduction to the core features of autism and how such features may manifest within the school environment, an overview of appropriate language and terminology, and an introduction to the neurodiversity movement. Participants are also introduced to key resources to support their own learning and the learning of their colleagues.

Engagement with the Toolkit

This strand focuses on equipping participants with the knowledge and skills to effectively engage with the Toolkit within their school setting, and to share their learning within their Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As a theoretical and practical framework, a Community of Practice emphasises the importance of democratic and shared approaches to professional learning and collaborative professionalism (Hargreaves and O'Connor, 2018) and, by default, school improvement. Participants are introduced to core texts, such as the Middletown Framework for Inclusion (NCSE, 2016) and the Looking at our Schools Framework (DES, Inspectorate 2016). Across all sessions, time is devoted to group discussion, where participants are encouraged to share practices and resources and to reflect on their engagement with the Toolkit. This practice is embedded across presentations in order to facilitate the growth of Communities of Practice for all participants.

In addition to these sessions, participants are encouraged to engage with the Toolkit on an ongoing basis throughout the year. Participants are presented with strategies and suggestions for engaging with the Toolkit, with a specific focus on how engagement with the Toolkit could serve to facilitate discussion and dialogue within the school community regarding current practices. These complementary features of the AFSI have been designed to build participant capacity to reflect on both conceptual and practical interpretations of inclusive education for autistic students, identify current strengths and challenges of existing inclusive educational practices within their school, and to establish an action plan to address these challenges.

Exploring the impact of the AFSI

A survey was developed to explore ways in which engagement with the AFSI has shaped participant understanding and awareness of autism, their attitudes towards inclusive education, and efforts towards building a more inclusive school culture. Development of survey items was informed by relevant literature and policy, the Middletown Framework for Inclusion and the objectives of the AFSI. In addition to demographic questions, survey items focused on four themes: Goals and Motivations, Awareness Raising, Engagement with the Toolkit, and Models of Professional Learning. Survey items across the four strands included Likert-scale questions and open-ended short answer questions. All Likert scale items were scored along a five-point scale, with response options being 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree', and 'strongly disagree'. Frequency distributions were calculated for demographic and Likert scale questions. Distributions for Likert scale items also indicate the percentage of respondents who endorsed 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neutral', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' for each item.

Survey participants

The survey was administered online, following the final, live professional learning session of the AFSI. More than half, 55 per cent (n=31), of all participants in year one of the AFSI completed the survey. Demographic characteristics, including professional roles, school setting and Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) designation, school size, and autism special class allocation, were collected for all participants. Data are displayed in *Tables 2 and 3*.

Strand one: participant goals and motivations

Participants answered short, open-ended questions regarding their goals and motivations for participating in the AFSI Initiative. Participants expressed the desire to promote inclusion, develop more supportive school environments, and increase awareness of autism among school staff.

> *"I want to make our schools safe and supportive of students with autism and to bring more awareness to staff and students." (Mainstream Post-primary Teacher).*

> *"We have autistic children in mainstream classes but I feel they are seen almost as the responsibility of the SNA/SET and we need to do better to support all these students." (Primary Principal).*

Participants identified goals of enhancing teaching skills and building capacity across the school to best support autistic learners.

> *"… build a more welcoming environment for students, develop skills across the staff, and give staff the confidence to work in an autism friendly environment." (Special Needs Assistant, primary).*

> *"…aim to get tools to embed autism class strategies and methodologies into mainstream practice." (Special Class Teacher, primary).*

The desire to promote inclusive practices was a common goal for participants, with a clear motivation to share their learning with colleagues and to build capacity across all members of the school team.

Strand two: awareness raising

Participants answered both Likert-scale and short open-ended questions to assess the impact of the AFSI on awareness levels. Questions focused on changes in understanding of inclusive education, changes to teaching practice, enhanced reflections on teaching practices, shared learning with school community, and implementation of learning during school closures. Data from Likert-scale items reveal that the majority of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that participation in the AFSI had increased their awareness of autism and inclusive education, across each area. Responses for individual items are displayed in *Figure 1*.

Table 2: Professional roles for all respondents

	Primary		Post-primary	
Role	**n**	**% of all participants**	**n**	**% of all participants**
Total participants	31	57%	23	43%
Mainstream Teachers	12	22%	4	7%
Special Education Teacher (SET)	5	9%	2	4%
SENCO	1	2%	2	4%
Special Class Teacher	3	9%	3	6%
Deputy Principal			1	2%
Principal	1	2%	-	-
SNA	3	6%	2	4%
Multiple roles (e.g. SET and SENCO, mainstream Teacher and Principal)	2	4%	9	17%

In their response to short-answer questions, participants demonstrated an increased awareness of the necessity of adopting a school-wide approach to inclusive education, as reflected by a SENCO in a primary school setting.

> *"I was aware of what was necessary but in terms of a whole school approach I feel I've learned much more. It should not be optional for teachers to be inclusive."*

Table 3: School profiles

School designation	n	%
DEIS*	10	12
Non-DEIS	42	78
School size	**n**	**%**
<300 students	20	37%
301 – 600 students	21	39%
601 – 900 students	9	17%
901 – 1200 students	3	7%
ASD special class allocation	**n**	**%**
No ASD special class	18	33%
Planning to open ASD special class soon	10	19%
1 ASD special class	11	20%
2 ASD special classes	5	9%
3 or more ASD special classes	10	19%

*DEIS
This denotes a school viewed as disadvantaged in terms of the socio-economic background of the pupils which has a programme designed to address this.

Participants also expressed an enhanced understanding of the importance of listening to the autistic student voice.

> *"I ask more questions of the children e.g. What would make it easier? Do the smells, sounds, etc. bother you? It allows the children to voice their feelings in a safe way – that they now know the teacher is more aware." (Mainstream Teacher, primary)*

Further, engagement with the AFSI supported participants in adopting a strengths based approach to supporting autistic students.

> *"It has enabled me to have a deeper understanding and see things from the child's perspective, and that I need to recognise their own way of learning." (Mainstream Teacher, primary)*

> *"We have jointly presented what we have learned here at staff meetings. The goal would be to make AFSI a regular part of staff meetings going forward." (Special Needs Assistant, primary)*

Such responses indicate that the AFSI encourages teachers to reflect on their practice, with much of this reflection happening in a collective and collaborative manner. Such awareness raising and reflection supports schools in identifying existing good practices and practitioners within schools, while simultaneously identifying shared visions for further development.

Strand three: engagement with the Toolkit

Participants answered both Likert-scale and short, open-ended questions to assess their engagement with the AFSI Toolkit. Likert-scale questions focused on the degree to which engagement with the Toolkit supported participant practice across the four domains of the Middletown Framework: teaching and learning, creating and promoting an inclusive school culture, leadership and management, and staff development. Findings indicate that over half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that engagement with the Toolkit enhanced or supported their practices across each of the above domains. However, for each item, approximately 40 per cent of respondents provided a response of 'neutral' across domains, indicating that engagement with the Toolkit was not as impactful for these respondents. Individual item responses are displayed in *Figure 2*.

Open-ended questions required participants to report on the utility and applicability of the Toolkit, challenges to adopting the Toolkit, and the impact of remote learning on engagement with the Toolkit. Participants highlighted how engagement with the Toolkit had supported schools in identifying strengths and needs relating to inclusive education for autistic students.

> *"The questionnaire really helped us focus in our committee meeting on what good practices we already had within our school and what needed developing." (Mainstream Teacher, primary).*

Figure 1: Likert-scale item responses for strand two: awareness raising

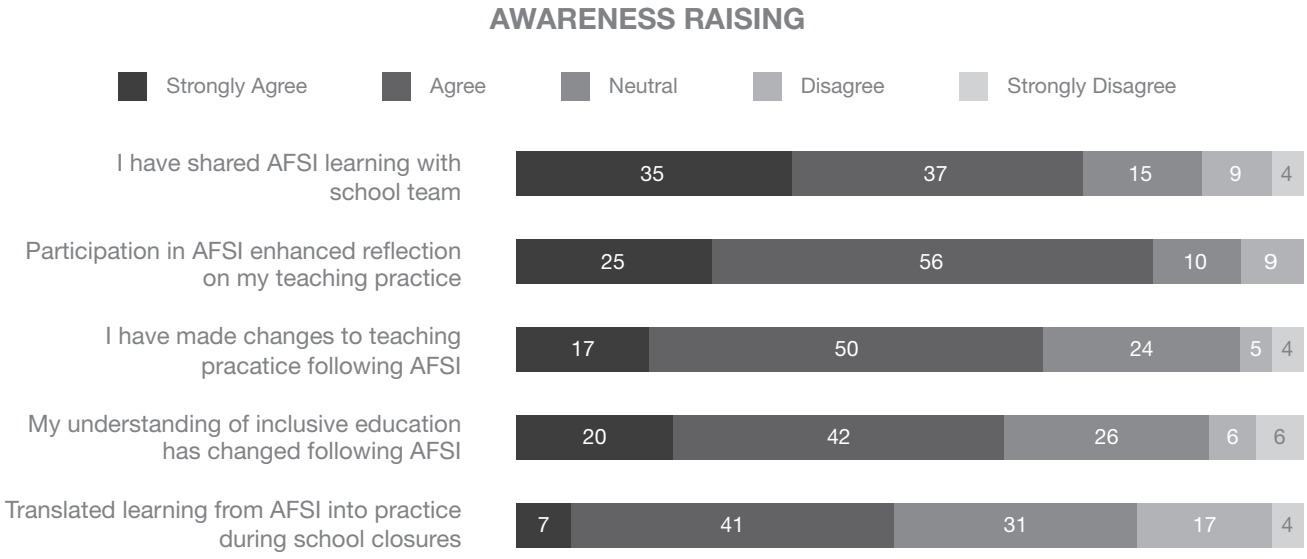


Figure 2: Likert-scale item responses for Strand Three: Engagement with the Toolkit

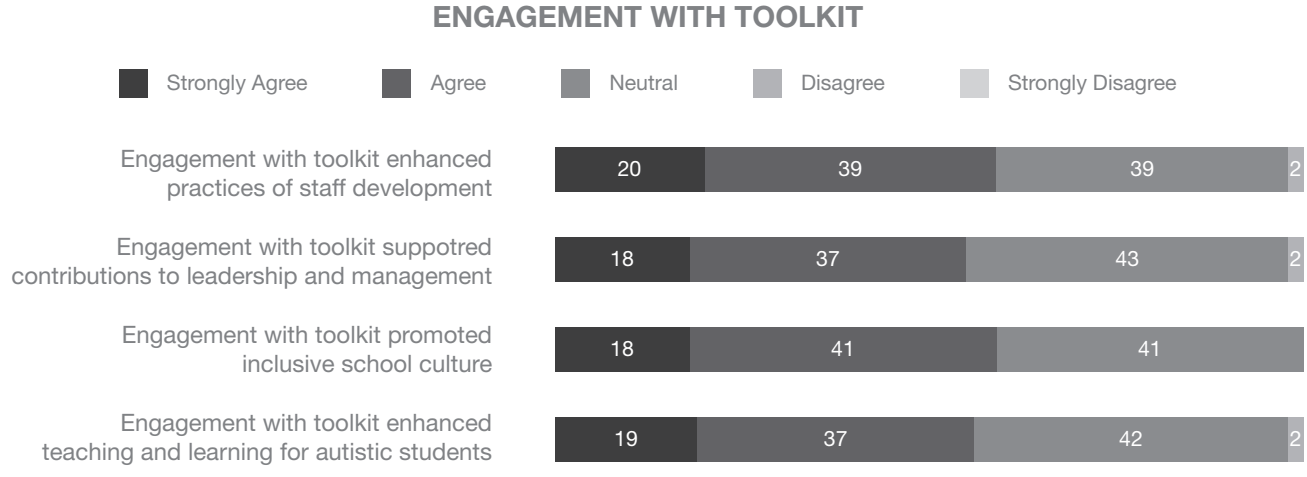
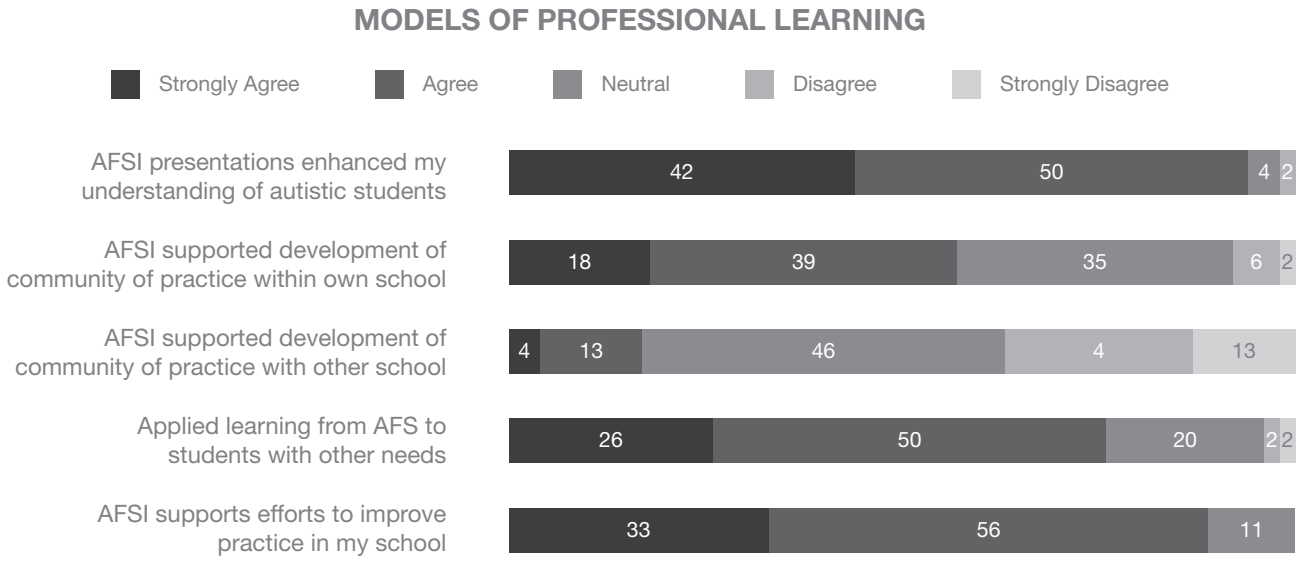


Figure 3: Likert-scale item responses for strand four: models of professional learning



However, some participants noted some challenges with engaging with school management when suggesting potential changes to existing practice.

> *"Leadership and management – it can be difficult to approach a senior member with ideas to change certain policy statements." (Mainstream Teacher, primary).*

Further challenges with engaging with the Toolkit arose from pandemic-related school closures, wherein teachers adjusted to providing online education.

> *"The Toolkit took a backseat as remote learning and contact with students was the priority." (Mainstream Teacher, post-primary).*

These results show a recognition of the potential impact of the Toolkit in enhancing school-wide reflective practices, despite being hampered by school closures and subsequent challenges such as increased workload and interruptions to typical contact with colleagues.

Strand four: models of professional learning

Questions focused on changes in understanding the strengths and needs of autistic learners, development of a community of practice both within participants' own schools and with other schools, application of learning from AFSI to learners with other learning needs, and the degree to which this type of professional learning supports participants efforts to improve their practices.

Data from Likert-scale items reveal an overwhelming endorsement of the impact of the AFSI presentations on participant understanding of the strengths and needs of autistic learners. Over half (57 per cent) of the participants reported that engagement with the AFSI supported their efforts to develop a community of practice within their own school, although by contrast over 80 per cent of participants indicated that participation did not support them in establishing a community of practice with other schools. Encouragingly, 76 per cent of participants reported that they have applied their learning from the AFSI to support learners with other additional learning needs, demonstrating transferability of learning from the AFSI. When asked

whether this model of professional learning supported participant efforts to improve practice within their school, 89 per cent of participants agreed or strongly agreed. Responses for individual items are displayed in *Figure 3*.

For each of the above topics, participants were prompted to elaborate briefly on their response by completing an open-ended question. Participants again highlighted the transformative impact of hearing the voices of autistic learners.

> *"The guest speakers who spoke about their experience of being an autistic student in school really opened my mind as to how best we can support these students". (Mainstream Teacher, primary).*

One said that participation in the AFSI served as a catalyst for school-wide dialogue about autism.

> *"It gave us a guide to initiate and start a conversation that has sometimes fed into staffroom conversations – it will continue to be normalised among our staff." (SENCO, post-primary)*

Encouragingly, participants also spoke about the transferability of learning from the AFSI to supporting students with other additional learning needs.

> *"A lot of the teaching and learning strategies suggested for autistic children can just as easily benefit others with learning needs e.g. visual timetables, movement breaks, more processing time, quiet space, getting to know their interests". (SET, primary).*

As illustrated by these quotes, the emphasis within the AFSI on highlighting the autistic voice while also focusing on ways in which good practice can be embedded within school cultures over time, serves as an impactful feature of the initiative.

Discussion

The findings indicate that participants in the AFSI reported a clear desire to develop school-wide, inclusive practices and to build staff capacity to meet the needs of autistic learners across settings, acknowledging the critical role of collaborative and collective approaches to the implementation of change. With respect to the impact of the AFSI on participant awareness, participants predominantly reported that engagement with the AFSI had enhanced their understanding of autism and inclusive education, enabled them to reflect on teaching practices, and supported them in making changes to their teaching practices. Further, participants developed an appreciation for the necessity of adopting a school-wide approach to inclusion, listening to the voice of the autistic learner and adopting a strength-based approach when working with autistic learners, specifically and diverse learners more broadly.

The Toolkit is a core component of the AFSI. Most respondents indicated that engagement with the Toolkit had supported their practice across the domains of teaching and learning, creating and promoting an inclusive school culture, leadership and management, and staff development. Engagement with the Toolkit supported participants in identifying current strengths and needs, serving as a catalyst for dialogue and discussion around how best to support autistic learners. The process involved in engaging with the Toolkit encouraged collective reflection and aligned with the School Self-Evaluation process. However, participants also identified time constraints as a barrier to engaging with the Toolkit, highlighting the challenges faced by teaching staff who wish to pursue consultative and collaborative practices within their own and other schools.

In particular, the focus within the AFSI on sharing the voice of autistic learners resonated strongly with the participants, with almost all participants indicating that these presentations enhanced their understanding of the strengths and needs of autistic students. This echoes the calls from multiple studies capturing the perspectives of autistic students, wherein students indicate a desire for teachers to participate in autism specific training and apply their knowledge from this training to enhance their understanding of the experiences of their autistic students (Cunningham, 2020; Goodall, 2018).

Encouragingly, participant response to this component of the AFSI was resoundingly positive, with 92 per cent of participants either strongly agreeing or agreeing that AFSI presentations enhanced their understanding of the needs of autistic students. A fair conclusion to draw here is that the desire for enhanced understanding of the needs and experiences of autistic students is expressed not only by students, but also by teaching staff undertaking the AFSI.

Concluding comments

The development of an inclusive school culture requires opportunities for high quality professional learning, with a specific focus on enabling reflective and collaborative practices within and across school teams. The Saturation model proves a fitting model for embedding inclusive practices within and across school cultures, as demonstrated by the AFSI. Critically, 'agents of change' can have a tremendous impact on their colleagues' awareness and understanding of the educational needs of autistic students. The findings from this survey represent participant views at a single timepoint of a multi-year initiative. As such, these findings are a snapshot in time, and will be explored in a further study, with an in-depth examination of participant experience of engagement with the AFSI over time.

References

AslAm National Charity for Autism (2021) Autism Friendly Schools Initiative (AFSI).

Banks, J, McCoy, S, Frawley, D, Kingston, G, Shevlin, M and Smyth, F (2016) *Special Classes in Irish Schools Phase 2: A Qualitative Study.* Trim: The National Council for Special Education.

Cunningham, M, (2020) This school is 100% not autistic friendly! Listening to the voices of primary-aged autistic children to understand what an autistic friendly primary school 103 should be like. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 26(12).

Daly, P, Ring, E, Egan, M, Fitzgerald, J, Griffin, C, Long, S, McCarthy, E, Moloney, M, O'Brien, T, O'Byrne, A, O'Sullivan, S, Ryan, M, Wall, E, Madden, R and Gibbons, S (2016) *An Evaluation of Education Provision for Children with Autism in Ireland.* Trim: National Council for Special Education.

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2006) *An Evaluation of Educational Provision for Children with Autistic Spectrum Disorders.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2016a) *Looking at Our Schools 2016: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2016b) *Looking at Our Schools 2016: A Quality Framework for Primary Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate (2020) *Educational Provision for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Special Classes Attached to Mainstream Schools in Ireland.* Dublin: Department of Education and Skills.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022a) *Looking at Our Schools 2022: A Quality Framework for Primary and Special Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education.

Department of Education Inspectorate (2022b) *Looking at Our Schools 2022: A Quality Framework for Post-Primary Schools.* Dublin: Department of Education.

Goodall, C, (2018) 'I felt closed in and like I couldn't breathe': A qualitative study exploring the mainstream educational experiences of autistic young people. *Autism and Developmental Language Impairments* DOI: 10.1177/2396941518804407 Hargreaves and O'Connor.

Government of Ireland, (2022) *Autism Good Practice Guidance for Schools: Supporting Children and Young People.* Dublin: Government of Ireland.

Lave, J and Wenger, E (1991) *Situated earning: legitimate peripheral participation.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Morewood, G D, Humphrey, N, and Symes, W (2011) Mainstreaming autism: making it work. *Good Autism Practice,* 12(2), 62–68.