

Autism: Belonging and Inclusion in Youthwork Conference



Millennium Forum
Derry/Londonderry

16th & 17th January 2023



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Rationale and Background

Community Youth Work (CYW), as a discipline, aims to be responsive to emerging trends in practice across the sector. The past number of years has witnessed the development of knowledge, interest and understanding of the needs of autistic young people and a desire to ensure inclusive provision throughout Community Youth Work practice. Such developments have witnessed increased numbers of organisations, students and practitioners developing programmes and carrying out research on the experiences of autistic young people, aimed at improving participation and inclusion. Emerging themes include improving training and provision for youth workers, understanding, and assessing needs and addressing issues affecting autistic young people and adults, such as employment, social exclusion, mental health, and emotional well-being.

The Millennium Forum in Derry/L'Derry was the setting for the 2023 event, the aim of conference being to bring keynote speakers, knowledge experts, youth workers and organisations to share learning, supporting, and enhancing practice across the youth work sector. Additional objectives were to discover what the challenges are and to better understand how to support autistic children and young people on both sides of the border. The need for this large-scale conference was identified following seminars on Community Youth Work and Autism in June 2022 organised by The Youth Work Alliance and Dr Breda Friel from Ulster University. This event also builds upon "Community Youth Work Practice and Autism - Understanding, Inclusion and Participation" an Erasmus funded conference held at Ulster University, Magee in 2019 (report attached).



The priority is inclusion, striving always to improve the experience of autistic young people who access youth work projects. The community Youth Work Department at Ulster University is delighted to be part of this collaborative project, we are enhancing knowledge and practice for youth workers, and conference will offer excellent learning from our workshops and speakers"

Dr Breda Friel (2023)

Conference 2023 brought together key organisations who support the sector including: Ulster University, The Youth Work Alliance, Co-operation Ireland through the OUR Generation Project, The Playtrail, Northwest Youth Services, Education Authority and Donegal Youth Service. Funding was provided by a consortium including The Education Authority, The Youth Work Alliance, YWeLp (Ulster University) and European Union's PEACE IV Programme, which is managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).

Welcome and Introduction to Conference

Conference was introduced by Katrina McIlmail from OUR Generation project and Dr. Jennifer Hamilton, Head of School of Applied Social and Policy Sciences at Ulster University. The background to the event was outlined by Dr Hamilton who welcomed delegates and speakers on behalf of Ulster University and the conference planning team.

Peter Sheridan, CEO Co-Operation Ireland welcomed delegates and presented the work of Co-operation Ireland as an all-island peace-building organisation aimed at addressing legacy issues of the conflict, facilitating contact and collaboration to build a shared and cohesive society by between people from different backgrounds across the island. The conference was part of the agency programmes targeted at marginalised young people and the importance of the exchange of knowledge and skills was welcomed.

Professor Siobhan O'Neill, Mental Health champion N.I described the role and purpose of the mental health champion and presented findings from recent research on the prevalence of mental health issues across N.I. She discussed the mental health issues experienced by autistic young people and adults and the importance and priority for inclusive policies and practices to support better outcomes.



Keynote Speakers

Chris Bonello

autisticnotweird.com
www.facebook.com/autisticnotweird
www.patreon.com/autisticnotweird



How to build up autistic young people in non-academic contexts

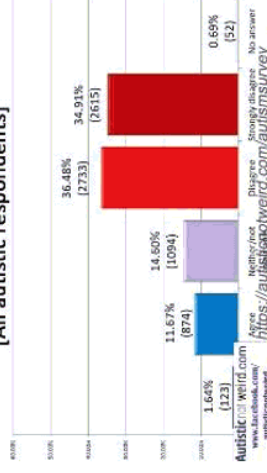
A few selected statistics...

- 700,000 autistic people in the UK
- 63% of parents feel their autistic child is not in a school that meets their needs
- 70% of autistic adults feel they're not getting what they need from social services
- 1 in 3 autistic adults experience severe mental health difficulties due to lack of support
- 15% of autistic adults are in full-time employment.
- But what's being autistic actually like?

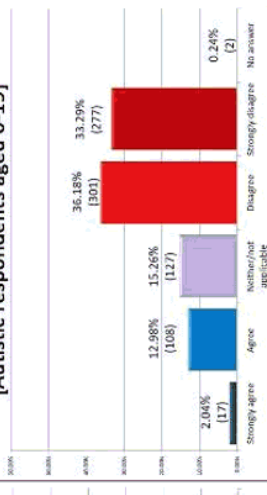
So...how can you help?

1. Look after our mental health

"My experience at school was positive."
 [All autistic respondents]



"My experience at school was positive."
 [Autistic respondents aged 0-19]



- Negative feedback from others.
- The world is built with "everyone else" in mind.

2. Self-perception means everything

- ### 3. Foster a sense of belonging
- ...because we're less likely to be manipulated this way

4. Help us to learn our strengths and play to them.

Chris introduced "autisticnotweird" and offered a narrative of his research and lived knowledge expertise on autism, challenges, research, education, and practice.

"Things I am not supposed to be good at" ...

- Eye contact
- Talking in a crowd
- Sarcasm
- Empathy

Chris challenged the deficit account of autism, considering how people with autism told & reminded of the many things they are not able to do and won't be good at.

What YW offers young people:

- Responsibility
- Leadership (setting outside of comfort zone)
- Playing to your strengths



What is being autistic like?

Chris describes a range of thoughts and experiences in articulating the experience of being autistic:

- "Feels like you are completely normal in a world full of really weird people."
- "Playing a game where no one has told you what the rules are."
- "Uninvited guest at a dinner party"
- "Everyone else's world"
- Anxiety done to me by other people not hardwired.

In considering how youth work can support young people, Chris reflected on the experience of education. Schools are generally designed for the mainstream –

- Brightness – This does not work for all Young People.

- Loud
- Surprises

Chris describes how youth work provides a space where YP can automatically be themselves & belong, and as a practice it must be inclusive and not simply allow people to be present.

For autistic people, Chris believes – Self-perception means everything...

- Focussing on strengths rather than those things you are told you are not good at.
- Being able to see self in a different way. **Own skills and abilities have not changed but how I perceive self has changed.**

Failing in mainstream and being failed in mainstream.

Foster a sense of belonging (because they will find it elsewhere) and possibly not in areas or behaviours we would wish for them.

Help autistic young people to learn their strengths and play to them.

- Find opportunities to give YP a chance to take responsibility.
- Prizing non-academic skills (all skills)
- Play to strengths or discover strengths they did not realise they had.

Evaleen Whelton



About AUsome Training

- Autistic-led
- Pro-Autistic and Pro-Neurodiversity
- Challenging Assumptions with inside knowledge
- Challenging the negative narrative and deficit model
- Dedicated to changing lives



About Evaleen

- Autistic since 2014!
- Evaleen Things
- Autistic ights
- What I do

so adorable!

Some myths about us...

- Autistic boys v girls: 4-1
- Autistic girls mask more...
- Autism presents differently
- We have better social skills
- Female autism



“Autism” is behavioural

- Autistics are human
- Girls socialised differently?
- Different expectations?
- Express anger as a girl?
- Words to describe girls v boys

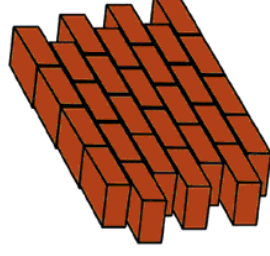
Culture shapes girls

- What stories do we grow up with?
- Who are “good girls”?
Ornamental
Here to please
- Educational opportunities?
- What is my purpose?
- Where is my power
- How do girls mask?
- The approval of others...



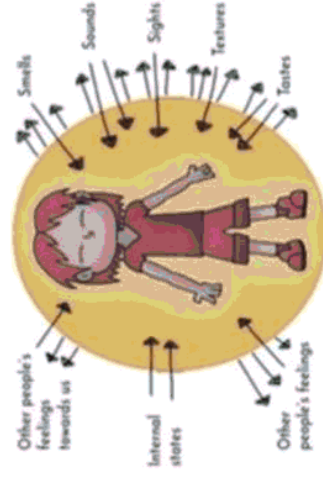
Culture shapes Autistics

- Autistics mask to fit in
- Why do we mask?
- What do we mask?
- How are we oppressed
- What barriers do we face?

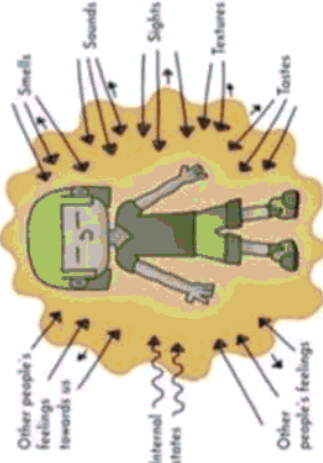


Being Autistic (not autism)

NON-AUTISTIC



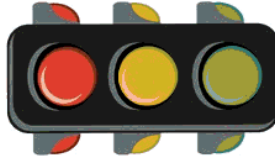
AUTISTIC



Intersection

Autistic discrimination
+
Gender discrimination
=
Poor outcomes for autistic girls & women

Culture shapes expressions of trauma



What do these outcomes look like?

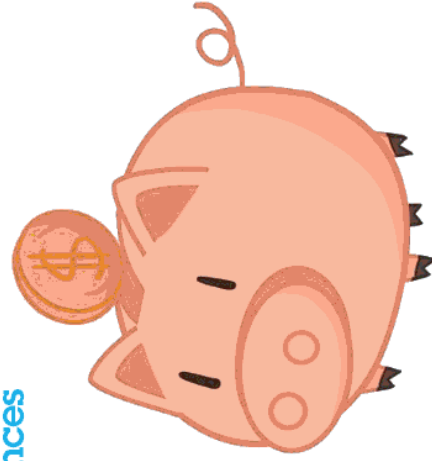
Social rejection, trauma, isolation of discrimination can lead to:

- stress
- fragmented sense of self
- more abuse
- anxiety
- PTSD
- low self esteem
- mental health issues
- suicidal tendencies
- depression
- cPTSD

Autism specific experiences

- Micro traumas
- Invalidation of sensory experiences
- Communication style ridiculed
- Trauma ignored "taught to behave"
- Stimming suppressed
- Often traumatised by school
- Underestimated
- Spoken over, spoken for...
- Denied access to AAC
- Abusive "therapies" like ABA, PBS

Autistic children are up to 3 times as likely as their peers to be targets of bullying and physical or sexual abuse and yet "how do we help them fit in? How do we help with their social skills?"



Any good news?

- It's a good time to be Autistic
- Neuro-affirming approaches
- Better understanding
- Better acceptance
- Stronger community



You



- Listen
- Be guided
- Be patient
- Trust
- Change the environment
- Remember, we are all just humans

new courses

START 2023 WITH AUSOME TRAINING

Autistic-led

Neuro-affirming

for Autistic people, parents & professionals

register now

WWW.AUSOMETRAINING.COM

Evaluen introduced herself and her experiences as an autistic woman, identified as autistic at the age of 37 and director of AUSome Training. She presented delegates with a unique perspective about autistic girls and their experiences. The high prevalence of masking and the factors that account for girls being overlooked. Evaluen examined the societal factors that influence masking, the myths of autism and the very restricted and limited perspectives of the negative medical model. She offered delegates an alternative view about what it means to be autistic, to look outside the very narrow neurotypical lens.

Dr Breda Friel

The Research and the Practice: What are they telling us?

Neurodiverse

- Understanding Autism as a variance/difference in neurocognitive functioning, rather than a deficit or impairment.
- The term was coined by an Australian sociologist called Judy Singer in the late 80s and early 1990's and now has been adopted by not only the Autistic community, but others too!
- Identity first language rather than people first language... although not unanimously used by the Autistic community, is more commonly used, as 'being' Autistic is more accurate to the experience, rather than 'having' Autism (den Houting 2018)

Maslow (1970)

- Robust psychological health
- Average represented stunted norm
- Average is a full human being whose powers and capacities have been somehow dampened or inhibited
- Self actualising is ordinary people with nothing taken away thus able to reach full-potential

Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-1980)

- The emotional experience and development of gifted young people
- Struck by intensity, sensitivity and tendency toward emotional extremes
- Part of talented and creative self
- Intensified experiencing, feeling, imagining and thinking potential for growth
- Also intensified pain, overstimulation, conflict

The therapy space

- High level intellect can mask difficulties
- Arrive sometimes with years of masking isolation/bullying/labelling
- Different and managing overwhelmingly stressful context
- Relationship and intimacy-bonding belonging
- Extreme presentation of fear and being down (pressing)
- What does this mean in practice?

In Practice I meet...

- Very critical perception of own values
- Dissatisfaction with self (angry)
- Inferiority and frustrated with own inadequacy
- Disquiet with self -agitated and fearful
- Shame and embarrassed by one's deficiencies
- Guilt and anguish over moral failures
- Positive maladaptation and antagonism and protest against violations of ethical/social principles
- Exhausted masking
- I'm flawed everyone else normal

Training Manifesto

- Mindful of training need in organisations
- Self-care
- Self-awareness
- Mental health and ASC
- Specific training to go beyond basic
- Equip in CPD and in basic training
- Training young people



Practice Manifesto

- Beyond traditional approaches
- Challenge Deficit and normal
- Optimal well-being
- Models of engagement
- Participation such as Lundy/Hart
- All responsible for inclusion
- Integrated approaches
- Focus on therapeutic

Policy Manifesto

- Consider the social model of disability
- Human rights based model in policy
- Resources required Process NOT outcome
- Equitable resources to support PACE
- Waiting Lists and AS
- Research for young women
- Partnership approach
- Design for learning needs redesign
- Media and Lived experiences of ASC

Dr Breda Friel reflected on developments in research and practice following on from the Conference held in Ulster University (Magee) in 2019. Her particular focus was on the missed-diagnosed, and mis-diagnosed, those with autism characteristic and find they are labelled as mentally ill/disordered! The exhaustion of masking, of feeling that they are constantly getting it wrong was discussed and Breda explored how the 'gifted' are often very misunderstood and may be perceived as excessive, troublesome, and over-excited. Persistent curiosity may be misconstrued as aggression, the tendency to question may be considered as undermining, traits of deep sensitivity may be misinterpreted as immaturity, self-directness may be seen as oppositional.

This leads us to reflect on what is 'normal, and the need to recognise that the statistical norm or average is an inappropriate measure within the life sciences. She contended that a more appropriate focus is on what is 'optimal' or well-developed, rather than what is normal or average.

Regardless of our professional discipline, Breda stressed that we need to realise the experience of intensity felt by autistic people. They experience intensified pain, overstimulation, and conflict. Breda referred to the theories of Kazimierz Dabrowski (1902-80) and his study of gifted people and their emotional extremes (which he referred to as 'over-excitabilities'). Breda noted that within the clinical practice she sees young people who are very critical and negative about themselves, who feel frustrated and inferior, who feel they are at fault and believe themselves to be social failures.

The question is, how do we support them? Applying this theory to practice, Breda contended that the supportive response in practice settings should encompass:

- 1 Confirmation that I am not flawed.
- 2 Affirmation of self as you are.
- 3 Work to the individual's capacity
- 4 Managing self and emotion.

The training, practice and policy manifestos identified through sectoral consultations in 2019 were discussed by Breda and the research about Gender dysphoria and Autism has recently emerged as a presenting theme and is being discussed in a conference workshop. Concluding comments included a call for the challenge of deficit approaches in practice and assessment, the myth of the "normal" the average in our understanding of inclusion and participation. Cross sectoral practice must see beyond traditional approaches to strive for opportunities that aim toward optimal well-being. There must be more research undertaken by Autistic researchers, authentic voices, and practice and research must more accurately depict the lived experience of Autism across settings.

Jude Morrow

- A 32 year old autistic child. Proud Dad too
- Two Time TED Speaker/ Touring Motivational Speaker/MC and Conference Host.
- Founder of Neurodiversity Training International and Senior Training Consultant with Potentia and Director of Neurodiversity Initiatives at RT Mental Health.
- We provide corporate training to health service bodies/businesses and charities as well as program/policy design for charities, social enterprises and business.
- Award Winning Author - Living Now Book Awards Gold Medal Winner 2021
- Host of the Neurodiversity Gold Podcast



Become a hero Youth Worker for Autistic Children

The 5 steps to truly support autistic young people in our community.

STEP 1: Banishing Autism Awareness

Autism - What is it? More importantly - What is your knowledge of Autism?

This is the OED Definition:

Autism (noun) - "A neurodevelopmental disorder characterised by social difficulties and/or obsessive and repetitive behaviours whilst having narrow interests".

Pretty negative isn't it? The majority of you agree with the definition - but for autistic people - can you see how it can be quite hurtful?

STEP 2: Removing The Idea We Lack Social Skills

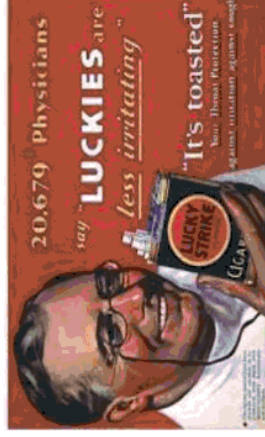
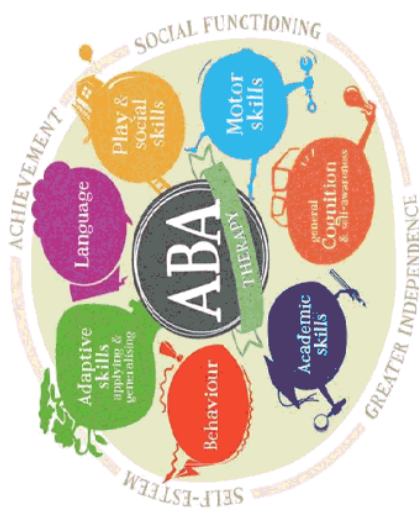
Social Skills - From an Autistic Viewpoint

- The ability to be fundamentally dishonest for the sake of "being polite".
- Autistic children are authentic, are born autistic, develop autistically, and have preferences LIKE EVERY OTHER CHILD IN THE WORLD.

- Let's do this as a thought experiment - imagine you went to a country with differing societal norms. Do you know the greeting for "kissing etiquette" around the world. How many times do you kiss someone on the cheek to greet them in Peru?

STEP 3: The Notion Of "Evidence Based" Supports For Autistic People

Back when people thought smoking "eased anxiety" and "recommended" by medical professionals



STEP 4: Recognising The Racketeering

Mob Tactics

- With the creation of digital marketing, social media, and information sharing - we entered into Mob tactics.
- The Mafia Way - Create a problem that does not exist, sell the solution to that problem, reiterate the consequences if the solution is not purchased
- What this is called - is RACKETEERING. Specifically AUTISM RACKETEERING. Buy our "therapy", to prevent your autistic child becoming "worse". If you don't buy our stuff - BAD THINGS WILL HAPPEN.

STEP 5: Listen To Us - Autistics Have Voices

What we do in a nutshell

- We work with Neurodivergent people, allies, and any ND Centered business to get their marketing right!
- We only focus in one market - THIS ONE. Most other marketing companies have everything from fast food to retail on their books - you are in good hands.
- This market is nuanced, and with our clients - we build online courses, online communities, digital assets that have price tags, marketing campaigns, branding, web design, consultancy and training specific to ND

Some major brands and non-profits we rocket neurodiversity

Jude Morrow introduced his personal and professional experiences as an autistic person, as an autistic youth/social worker and he described the challenges and deficits from traditional approaches in the knowledge of autism and working with autistic young people. His discussion centered on how to be a hero for autistic young people, supporting them through youth work practices, improved knowledge and skills. Jude outlined the work of his organisation, Neurodiversity Training International, an autistic led marketing and training company, supporting charities, health trusts and companies. Listening to the voices of autistic people and supporting the growth and success of autistic children and young people requires a transformed approach in practice and understanding.

Contact Us

BE PART OF THE MOVEMENT. BE PART OF THE CHANGE. REALISE THE CURRENT SYSTEM DOESN'T WORK AND THAT YOU HAVE AN ALTERNATIVE WHICH MEANS YOU AREN'T PAYING AN ARM AND A LEG AND YOUR SANITY. EVERY YEAR FOR TRAINING THAT SIMPLY DOESN'T WORK.

DO THE RIGHT THING - CHOOSE NTI

www.calendly.com/judemor
www.neurodiversity-training.net
jude@neurodiversity-training.com

Anne Walsh

Working with Autistic Young People

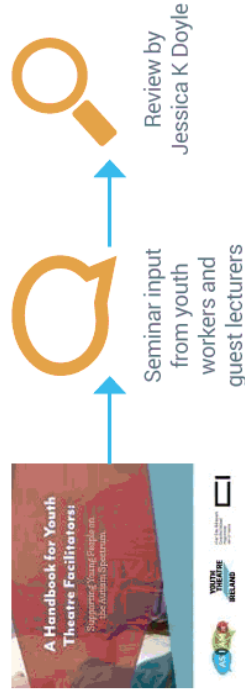
Context

- Access All Areas is a resource written by experts, usually youth workers, for other youth workers.
- Accessible, designed for youth workers who are starting out on a journey of inclusion with specifically named identity groups



- Up until 2019 Autism had the briefest mention and it was in our Learning Disability chapter
- Seminar with youth workers in Maynooth 2019 identified a significant resource gap

Development of the resource



CHAPTER SIX B
Working with Autistic Young People

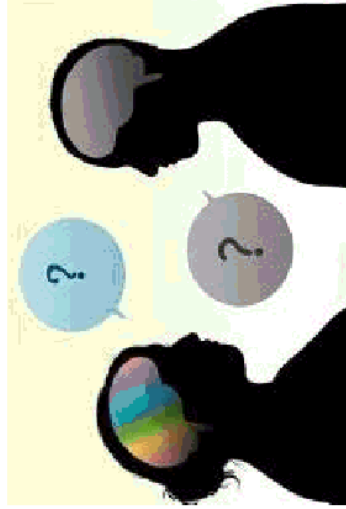
Introduction

This section focuses on autism. It explains the reasons why young people with autism may struggle to engage in youth work activities, why the current system does not work for them, and how we can support them to engage in youth work activities that are meaningful to them.

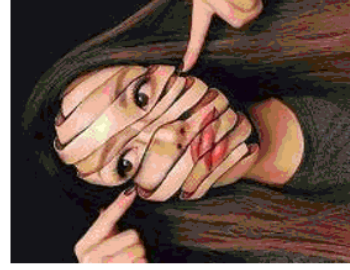
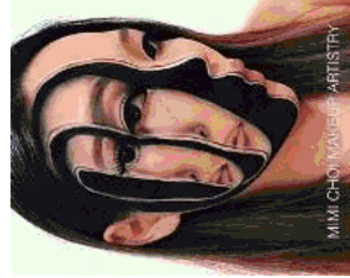
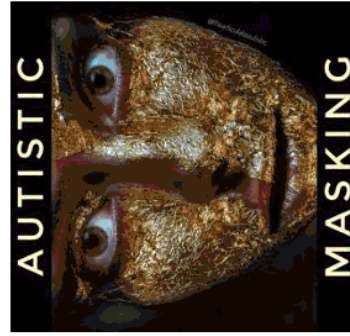
Autistic young people are a diverse population, and their needs are not the same. It is important to understand the individual needs of each young person and to tailor the support to their needs.

Autism is a complex, lifelong neurodevelopmental condition that affects the brain. It is a spectrum condition, meaning that the symptoms and severity of the condition can vary significantly between individuals. The symptoms of autism are often present from early childhood, but they may not be identified until later in life.

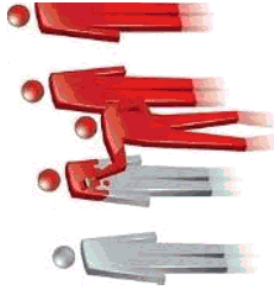
Double Empathy



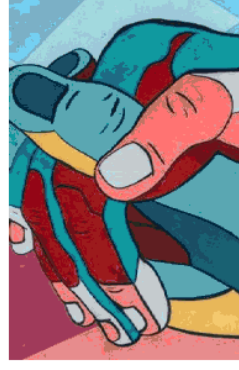
Terminology



Assimilation Vs Appreciation of Difference



Making Authentic connection



8 Senses



Proprioception
body awareness and movement, control and spatial awareness

Vestibular
balance and movement

Interoception
awareness of the body and feelings

Praise



Demand anxiety

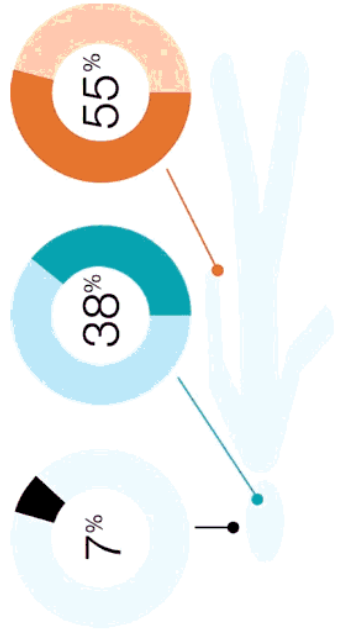
Useful tools

Sensory Checklist
www.asiam.ie/

Sensory Audit
www.asiam.ie/

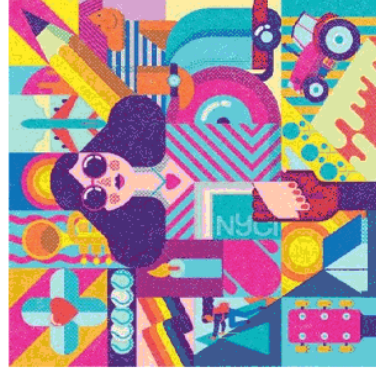
Sensory Environment Checklist
<https://bbc.github.io/uxd-cognitive/index.html>

MIS???



If the young person cannot or does not want to follow the movement instructions in a game or activity let them move in their own way."

Jessica K Doyle



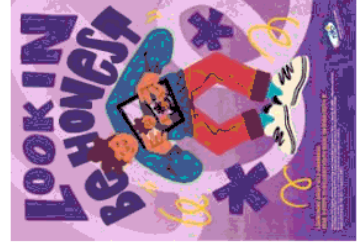
"We all stim."

"But stimming for an Autistic person is as natural as breathing."

"Stimming aids well-being, expression, self-regulation, relaxation, concentration and focus."

Responding to Difference

Self-awareness and critical reflection



Take aways?

- 1 Ask me, Hear me, Respond
- 2 Youth work makes such a massive difference - we need to keep sharing and learning
- 3 We need to keep flexing our inclusion muscles



Dates for sharing, learning hubs

Omagh 20th February

Dublin 23rd February

Galway 22nd March

Munster region 17th May

Anne Walsh is the manager of the National Youth Council of Irelands Equality and Intercultural Programme and presented conference with a resource launched in 2022. Working with Autistic Young People was the latest in an Access All Areas set of diversity toolkits being launched by NYCI. The Autism tool kit has been one of the organisations most downloaded chapters, evidence of the extensive interest across the sectors in this area of practice with young people. In addition to presenting the chapter and resources, Anne shared her own journey, the knowledge and understanding she gained as she worked with a range of authors in compiling the resource. Most significantly Anne described her learning through the collaboration with Jessica K. Doyle, an Autistic and Sensory Consultant, Anne shared a range of themes including terminology, empathy masking and the senses.

Links were provided for a range of resources:

Sensory Checklist
www.asiam.ie/

Sensory Audit
www.asiam.ie/

Sensory Environment Checklist
<https://bbc.github.io/uxd-cognitive/index.html>

Workshops

During the morning and afternoon sessions conference delegates attended their chosen workshops. These interactive sessions comprised key presentations, along with the opportunity for lively discussion, participation and a sharing of experiences and expertise. A summary of the workshops presentations is presented below.

Calm with Carole

Lego the toy that never gets old was the methodology that was presented in this workshop. Lego based therapy is a tool to connect with the child when counselling.

Participants were asked to create.

- a An animal
- b Food eaten (last 24 hours)
- c A way to cross a river.
- d Desert island with pirates – how would you scare the pirates away.

The benefits of Lego were discussed, it is inclusive and expresses the individual's creativity. There are no wrong answers. It can be used as

- 1 Intervention
- 2 To draw the person in – children are naturally drawn to Lego.

It promotes:

- Team Building
- Problem Solving
- Understanding others' Perspective/ideas
- Conversation/Communication in a natural environment allows the conversation to flow.

It shows the participants that they are worthy of our time no matter how different the creation. The programme presented by Carole was initially designed for autistic children, but it works well as a tool for everyone. Empowering young people to see outside their world and to introduce problem solving skills. The workshop goes out to schools, and they provide training to organisations that are interested in introducing Lego Therapy to their organisation.



Andy Hazley Learning Space

Sensory Awareness

Andy gave a background to his career and personal experience of being diagnosed himself and being dad to 3 autistic children. He outlined the aim of the session – to give a better understanding for delegates of the sensory experience.

Sensory – 5 main senses and two additional senses – proprioception and vestibular – Sense of balance

Andy discussed the build-up for autistic children and young people when senses are overregulated and underregulated. This can include children being unable to communicate sensory issues, there might be a reaction, e.g., Flight mode when overstimulated – running off. Andy considers that where there are good sensory integration children can process information well. Andy gave delegates the example that we all relate to sensory issues e.g., cotton wool, nails on a blackboard, however this is exacerbated for a young autistic child 50 to 100 times more. The workshop used examples of a young autistic child's experience in mainstream classroom situation and how best to respond. Andy described a range of sensory tools and gadgets, from weighted blankets to fidget toys.



Chris Bonello Autistic not weird

Creative Writing

Paper and pen given to all delegates.

Chris started the session by talking about his work supporting young people through creative writing. He talked about how one child drew a lot of devil/black/dark images and words, but he reiterated it was important for this young person to have a creative outlet to allow emotions to be processed. Negative emotions with nowhere to go can cause problems. Chris also discussed the use of Music/Art/Writing and the benefits for dealing with emotions.

Benefits of writing for Chris personally – found it to be fun as a 12-year-old boy when he started and stated that writing allowed him to control the narrative, which was something that he and other autistic people struggled with in life. For him, autonomy is not a given when you are autistic. Chris referred to himself being seen as a 'Meaningful model for neurodivergent representation.'

Delegates were asked to consider that any motivation for writing is a valid one.

The main tenets of writing for emotional expression:

Your writing is allowed to be rubbish.

- Write on your own terms no one else's.
- You do not need to publish your writing for it to be valuable.
- Give yourself permission to be awful at the things you love.'

During the workshop, an excerpt was read to the group and participants were set a task where each person was to write a conversation between 2 people a dialogue where they are experiencing a problem. The exercise was reviewed, with participants feeling both challenged and creative. The learning object was to see the value of creative writing for expressing emotions. Chris finished by reminding the group that they should set up an environment for a young person where they are not afraid of the person looking over their shoulder.

Workshop: Relationship Building/Communication

Facilitator: Evaleen Whelton – AUsome Training

Welcome and Introductions.

Evaleen had different coloured stickers – green/orange and red which she offered to each participant green was if you were happy to take part in activities/orange if you were not sure and red if you did not want to participate. This would make it easy for her to choose people when doing the interactive exercises Evaleen's workshop consisted of three exercises each looking a different area/challenge for autistic people.

Exercise 1: Double Empathy – showing that communication is not always perfect for everyone.

The facilitator created two lines of five people and gave the person at the head of the line a sentence to act out without speaking who would pass on to the next person and they the next, so the message was sent down the line. The person at the end of the line then had to say what they thought the sentence was based upon the action they were shown. This caused a lot of laughter and high energy as rarely the message guessed by the final participant was the actual sentence. The exercise was effective at proving how challenging communication can be with people and that it is not always perfect regardless of who the people are.

Exercise 2: Negative Perspectives – to demonstrate how negative autistic people feel about themselves as there is not any research on it.

The facilitator created two lines of seven people facing each other creating a tunnel or alley and asked each person to think of something positive to say to a volunteer who would walk down the alley. So as the volunteer walked through everyone said something nice like 'your umper suits you' or 'your hair looks well today' etc. At the end of the alley after receiving all the positive compliments the volunteer said how it made them feel. In this instance the volunteer felt uncomfortable with people saying nice things and explained as an autistic person they were not used to positive comments.

We then moved onto the people creating the alley asked to do the same thing but only saying negative things, so Evaleen gave each person a piece of paper with a negative comment to say as the volunteer passed through the alley. In this instance at the end of the alley the volunteer shared that they felt much more comfortable receiving negative comments as they had been conditioned to hear this from an early age reinforcing what they were familiar with. Very interesting exercise.

Exercise 3: Sensory Awareness – to demonstrate how autistic people feel in a social setting like a restaurant.

Evaleen set up a role play situation with two people sitting in a restaurant discussing an issue like the cost-of-living crisis. During their conversation there was no distractions, and the conversation could flow easily without distraction. The facilitator stopped the conversation and asked volunteers to make loud noises, to shake their chairs and jump up and down in front of them as they had the same conversation for the second time. This caused much confusion and was very difficult for the couple to have a conversation in this environment given the level of distraction. The point of this exercise was to show in an exaggerated way how noisy a restaurant can be and highlight some of the challenges and how sensitive autistic people can be.

Once all three exercises were complete, Evaleen asked the group: What can we do? What changes need made? And the responses are as follows:

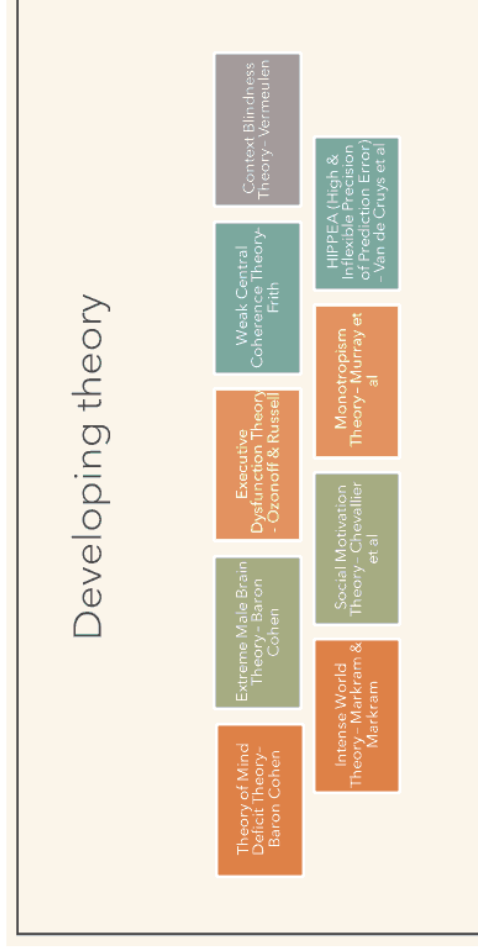
- More learning – more life experiences from autistic people themselves.
- More training and better understanding for professionals.
- More understanding.
- Creating spaces – creating an environment that suits

Dr. Breda Friel and Rua – A Conversation: Autism Gender Identity and Wellbeing

The experiences of autistic and transgender young were the focus of the workshop, presented by Dr Breda Friel and Rua. The presentation was based on the review of 25-30 articles, across a range of databases and workshop also shared the lived expertise of transgender young people. The strength-based approaches were presented namely the fundamental belief that every individual has the ability to grow, develop and flourish, given the right environment. The workshop emphasised that we do not minimize or ignore the areas for improvement, focus on the strengths first. Everyone has a different purpose in any team, let us build teams where each individual's strengths are acknowledged and appreciated: the language and terminology, models, and assessment, planning and policy must all be considered from a strength-based approach. The traditional and deficit approaches to autism were challenged with the social model of disability described. Neurodivergence was considered:

- Psychological/Cognitive diversity
- Neurological diversity underpinned by
- Genetic diversity + Diverse Learning Environments
- A paradigm/framework (e.g., in therapy/youth work):
- Autism etc seen primarily as "Neurodivergent," - atypical, examples of human neurodiversity.
- Minority rights movement/programme: Part of the broader diversity movement: cultural, gender diversity, racial/ethnic diversity.

The development of theories and approaches in the understanding of autism was discussed, the subsequent impact on the explanations of gender dysphoria was also considered by the workshop:



Gender Identity

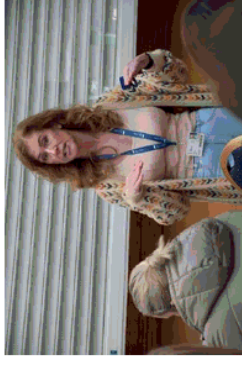
- Historic question- can autistic children develop gender identity
- Abelson (1981) YES but - a cognitive understanding of gender, instead of a core feeling of being a boy or a girl
- Marked incongruence between the patient's experienced or expressed gender and his or her primary or secondary sex characteristics

From a historic perspective that autistic children and young people have a limited understanding of gender identity, the workshop discussed research findings on the prevalence of people with autism in presentations to gender clinics. The workshop considered the range of factors associated with gender dysphoria, including psychological, biological, and social factors, and concluded that it was essential to ensure an individual psychosocial developmental perspective, and to recognise the complexity for each person, and these matters. We must ensure principles of good planning, the use of relational approaches with commitment to true inclusion in supporting young people on their transgender and gender dysphoria journeys.

Claire Thompson Creative Therapies Art Therapy

This was an interactive "hands on" workshop and Claire explained that there are 3 sensory profiles Intuitive, Thinking and Bystander. The workshop emphasised the benefits of art in working with all three. The importance of this is the process of creating what you feel – it may become a final piece it may not, and it does not matter!:

Participants were given 20 minutes to create their own artwork – get involved in the process, with a wide range of materials provided for the purpose. The workshop facilitated a discussion, a review of the art process with feedback from participants on their creative work.



Mary Cunningham CEO National Youth Council of Ireland

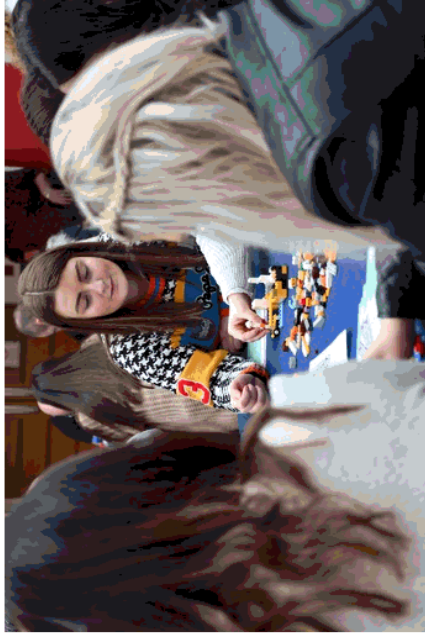
Closing Comments Day One

In closing the conference Mary Cunningham recapped some of the key messages and ideas which had been expressed over the course of the day. Mary highlighted key words from the emerging themes of the day, namely confident, competent, creative, and can-do. She described these as central to the development of knowledge, skills, and practice in autism and youth work. The conference had also pointed to the need for further research, a reflection on policy and Mary noted that the conference is part of a longer-term commitment by those within the sector in supporting ongoing development. Mary thanked several organisations and individuals for supporting the conference, including funders and partners, the keynote speakers, the workshop presenters and Chairs, the Millennium Forum for hosting the event, the catering and physical resources and all those who had attended and contributed so positively throughout the conference.



Autism: Belonging & Inclusion in Youthwork Conference Evaluation Feedback from Participants.

Evaluations were completed on both days of the conference using menti - meter with the results of the feedback displayed on the stage for participants to see. The results from both days are presented below.



Knowledge Acquisition

When asked 'Do you know more about the area of expertise as a result of attending this conference?' 188 replies were recorded across the 2 days, 182 answering 'yes' and 6 answering 'no'.

Application of Knowledge

When asked 'can you apply what you have learned from the conference to yourself and others?' 190 replies were recorded across the 2 days, 189 answering 'yes' and 1 answering 'no'.



When asked 'This conference will be worthwhile for me to use in my life/work?' 194 replies were recorded across the 2 days, 192 answered 'yes' and 2 answered 'no'.

When asked 'I intend to use what I have learned to benefit myself and/or others?' 195 replies were recorded across the 2 days, 192 answered 'yes' and 3 answered 'no'.

Confidence

When asked 'This conference has made me more confident in this area of expertise?' 196 replies were recorded across the 2 days, 164 answered 'yes' and 32 answered 'no'.

Due to the high numbers of 'no' replies in this question on day one of the conference it was agreed that a further qualitative question here would help give some understanding, therefore on day 2 participants

were asked, 'if no what would make you more confident?' The key feedback from the 35 responses was as follows;

Funding, training, and having more autistic people in employment with us were the most common replies. Other inputs to what would make staff more confident in this area was support, knowledge and understanding, self-belief, more staff to meet ratios, experience, clarity (as there is a lot of confusion), ability to manage challenging behaviors and a key one was thinking on and processing of all the information from the conference.



Barriers to Practice

When asked 'As a practitioner what do you see as the barriers for you to work in this area of expertise?' There were 189 replies with funding being the most popular response by far, closely followed by training, confidence, and policy. The next most popular responses were experience, facilities, no barriers, resources, lack of understanding and too many mixed messages. Many



respondents also stated that barriers for them as a practitioner were time, workload, attitudes of staff, staffing levels, communication, lack of current research/reliable info and not being autistic themselves. Other responses that were less common were fear, myself, intolerance, prejudice and the limits to support young people without a medical diagnosis and lack of self-referral.

When asked the question 'What are the barriers you face as an organisation in creating a space for this area of work?' There were 189 replies with funding again being the most common response. Space, staffing, facilities, time, training, and lack of trust in EA were also popular responses to this question. Less popular responses also included lack of knowledge at management level, fear of getting it wrong, staff acceptance, universal approach, true partnership, affect change, attitudes, prejudice, and unconscious bias. Single responses included unrealistic targets from funders, too few allies/others who share enthusiasm to affect change, commitment, and time. One respondent stated that it is difficult to have a space that meets the needs of both neuro-typical and neuro-diverse young people at the same time.

[Tuesday 17th January 2023](#)

Jude Morrow
www.neurodiversity-training.net

Title: How to Become A Hero Youth Worker For Autistic Children

For this keynote address, Jude will combine his personal and professional experiences of being autistic, a youth worker, and an autistic youth worker. With a combination of high-value guidance on working with autistic children and razor-sharp wit, Jude will provide the perfect template of how to become a hero youth worker for autistic children who may go on to be youth workers themselves. Jude is an award-winning best-selling author, former youth/social worker, and the founder of Neurodiversity Training International - an autistic-led marketing, training, and consultancy company that serves charities, health trusts, and Fortune 500 companies. Jude tours the world to showcase that autistic children can grow to have happy and successful lives, succeed in business, and live their lives without having to conform to the expectations and comfort levels of others.

Anne Walsh
www.youth.ie

Title: Working with Autistic Young People

In 2022 the National Youth Council of Ireland launched a resource called 'Working with Autistic Young People'. It is the latest chapter in Access All Areas, the diversity toolkit for the youth work sector. Since its launch it has been one of their most downloaded chapters, demonstrating the massive need and interest in the youth work sector for the subject matter it contains.

Anne Walsh, manager of NCI's Equality and Intercultural Programme and editor of the chapter will speak about her own journey of learning as she worked with the various authors who contributed to the chapter. Key to its development was Anne's engagement with Jessica K Doyle, an Autistic and Sensory Consultant. Anne will address a range of topics including terminology, empathy, masking and the senses.

[Workshop Facilitators / Information](#)

[Monday 16th January 2023](#)

Calm with Carol
Lego Therapy. LEGO®, the toy that never gets old

LEGO®-Based therapy is one of many interventions that supports the development of social skills in a child or young person's life. It combines building skills, listening turn-taking, problem-solving, feedback and teamwork. In this session, discover how to use LEGO® to 'build' social interactions and empower children's voices. Explore ideas that'll challenge your thinking and allow you to step back into the world of a child, surrounded by colour, opportunity, and fun.

The session will be delivered by Carole Wilmont, Director of CALM with Carole Ltd. CALM with Carole is a counselling and therapeutic support and training intervention for children. They specialise in special educational needs, communication challenges and developing strategies to aid effective communication.

E-mail: info@withcarole.com

Evaileen Whelton – AUesome Training
Relationship Building- Understanding Autistic Communication

Despite unproven theories Autistic people are not actually lacking in social skills! Research and testimonies from Autistics show that we have a different way of communicating. In this workshop Evaileen will give a brief overview of Autistic Communication and The Double Empathy Problem and facilitate group activities to enhance understanding of how Autistic people communicate.

E-mail: hello@ausometraining.com

Jude Morrow – Neurodiversity Training International
Autism Racketeering - A Dissection of the "Autism Industry"

Nobody in the history of brainwashing has ever come out of being brainwashed by being told they have been brainwashed. In this workshop - Jude will attempt to do just that. The Autism industry governs what the general public learns about autism, autistic people, and how autistic people live their lives. In this dissection, Jude will showcase that the idea of "social skills" is ridiculous, the idea that autistic children have "deficits in communication" is preposterous, and autistic children "lacking empathy" is ludicrous. This workshop will be an interactive discussion that promises not to be a comical rant and provide a solid foundation which professional practice should be built on.

E-mail: jude@neurodiversity-training.com

Monique Hart – Ulster University **Mindfulness to Promote Inclusion of Young People with ASD**

Monique Hart is a registered occupational therapist and allied health professional with a clinical background in community mental health. For the past 18 years she has been a Lecturer in the School of Health Sciences, Ulster University and is module coordinator for a module designed to support students with autism transitioning into university life. Monique has delivered a number of mindfulness workshops to a range of health professionals and has an interest in investigating if there is a link between mindfulness and the neuroscience underpinning sensory integration (SI).

This workshop will provide a quick guide to a mindful approach and some taster activities. It will aim to highlight simple strategies that can facilitate functional ability, social integration and independence for young people including those with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD).

You should expect to hear about - What is mindfulness?, why can it be useful?, how can you use it as an approach to activities with young people? How might it help promote inclusion of young people with ASD? You will be signposted to further learning and resources that could help you implement this approach in your future work with young people and in stress reduction for yourself and others. You can contact Monique at m.harte@ulster.ac.uk if you wish to seek further advice or training.

E-mail: m.harte@ulster.ac.uk

Dr Breda Friel & Rua McNamara – Ulster University **A Conversation: Autism, Gender, Identity and Wellbeing**

This workshop offers a conversation about the growing link emerging in literature and practice between autism and gender dysphoria. Firstly, we offer the thoughts of one person's journey, sharing their lived experience and expert view. Secondly, we consider the findings on a review of the literature in the area. The workshop will discuss factors and themes emerging in the studies and finally, we offer best practice recommendations with a particular focus on mental health and well-being. Dr Breda Friel is Course Director for the Postgraduate, Master's programme, and Continuous Professional Development Short Courses (Level M) in Community Youth Work at Ulster University Magee. She is the director of The Centre for Youth Research and Dialogue (CYRD) and her research is focussed on suicide prevention, Autism, and the importance of relationships in practice. Her current research is studying Museums, Crisis and Covid-19. Specialising in trauma debriefing and critical incident responses, Breda is an accredited therapist and clinical supervisor with the Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP) and the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). She works with statutory and voluntary agencies in managing resources and support following critical events and current research is focusing on the unfolding narrative and practice themes emerging from Covid-19 and its impact on individuals and communities. Breda is a founding member of several mental health initiatives, including Insight Inishowen, Jigsaw Donegal, the Social Prescribing Programme, and the award-winning Feel-Good Fortnight in Inishowen. She is the author of *The Irish Association of Suicidology: A History (2020)*.

E-mail: bn.friel@ulster.ac.uk

Andy Hazley - Learning Space **Sensory Awareness**

Andy is an ASD, Sensory and additional needs Training Specialist who has a wealth of experience delivering ASD training, helping families and training professionals. His expertise comes not only from own personal experience of having ASD, along with having 3 children with ASD, but it comes from engulfing his life in attending courses, researching and constantly learning from the children, families and professionals he supports. His passion in this field drives him so that more children can be understood and that those around them can put steps in place to support them. All with the aim of making a positive impact on individuals lives and being an advocate for ASD, sensory and additional needs.

Workshop Objectives:

- Gain a real insight of Autism, Sensory and additional needs;
- Gain greater empathy and understanding of needs;
- Learn effective strategies tools and coping mechanisms;
- Gain ideas of how to use and get the most out of your room/equipment to make a bigger impact;
- Leave feeling empowered and a better understanding of what can help and why.

E-mail: andy@learningspaceuk.co.uk

Tuesday 17th January 2023

Chris Bonello **Creative Writing and Emotional Expression**

In this workshop, Chris Bonello – a multiply-published author, autistic advocate and former teacher will explore one of the most valuable and understated parts of creative writing.

When young people are taught how to write stories, they are taught plenty about formal literary techniques but little about the true value of storytelling: that by writing – whether fiction or non-fiction, poetry or prose, sensible or silly – the writer has a golden opportunity to express their inner self. Creative writing can release trapped emotions that would otherwise be rolling around the writer's head with no place to go, and releasing it through the creative arts is not just good for building a young person's talent, but also their mental health.

Bonello will share his writing experiences, from being a child who wanted to write stories for his cousin, to an adult who wrote as a coping mechanism for unemployment, to an author who writes books professionally and regularly delivers school author visits. There will also be opportunities for delegates to put their own creativity into practice – whether they believe themselves to be creative or not!

E-mail: chris@autisticnotweird.com

Rebecca McCullough – Eden Consultancy NI Anxiety & Autism

Having taught individuals on the Autistic spectrum across all 4 key stages, one of the key questions was why is Autism and Anxiety so often found together? Were they linked? Were these young people more susceptible to Anxiety than others?

I explored these questions during my psychological sciences MSc research. I now use this combination of experience to equip those who are working with or raising individuals on the Autistic spectrum.

During this interactive workshop we will be exploring how our brains and bodies work in moments of anxiety and sharing practical approaches to equip youth workers to create an environment where young people on the Autistic spectrum can flourish.

E-mail: rebecca@edenconsultancy.com

Claire Thompson – Creative Therapies Art Therapy

Claire is a Counsellor, Art Psychotherapist and PhD Researcher at Ulster University. Claire is both autistic and ADHD (AuDHD) and the Neurodiversity Ambassador for the National Counselling and Psychotherapy Society. While mainly working within the community and private practice Claire also writes and delivers Neurodiversity training to counsellors and therapists at further education colleges and universities.

Claire's ambition is to advocate for those who consider themselves neurodivergent. She is enthusiastic about affirmative support and societal conversations that value differences in thinking which are informed and communicated by those who identify as being in a neurominority group (autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia etc) and current research. Claire's workshop will be exploring how art therapy can help support emotional regulation. Autistic people have different sensory profile needs that fluctuate, the somatic experience art materials offer have the potential to match those needs. This will be a fun, hands on experience!

E-mail: info@creativetherapies.website

Denise Doherty - YouthAction NI Autism & Employment

Denise works on the GETSET Programme for YouthAction NI, a Regional youth employability programme for young people aged 16-24 years who are outside of training employment and education. Operating across all of YouthAction NI's regional bases GET SET works in partnership with business, communities and young people to develop their skills for living, learning and work so that they can progress into employment or into further education and training.

Workshop objectives:

- Person centred approach and needs assessment
- Work Skills Preparation
- The Youth Workers role
- The Employers role

E-mail: denise@youthaction.org



Participants

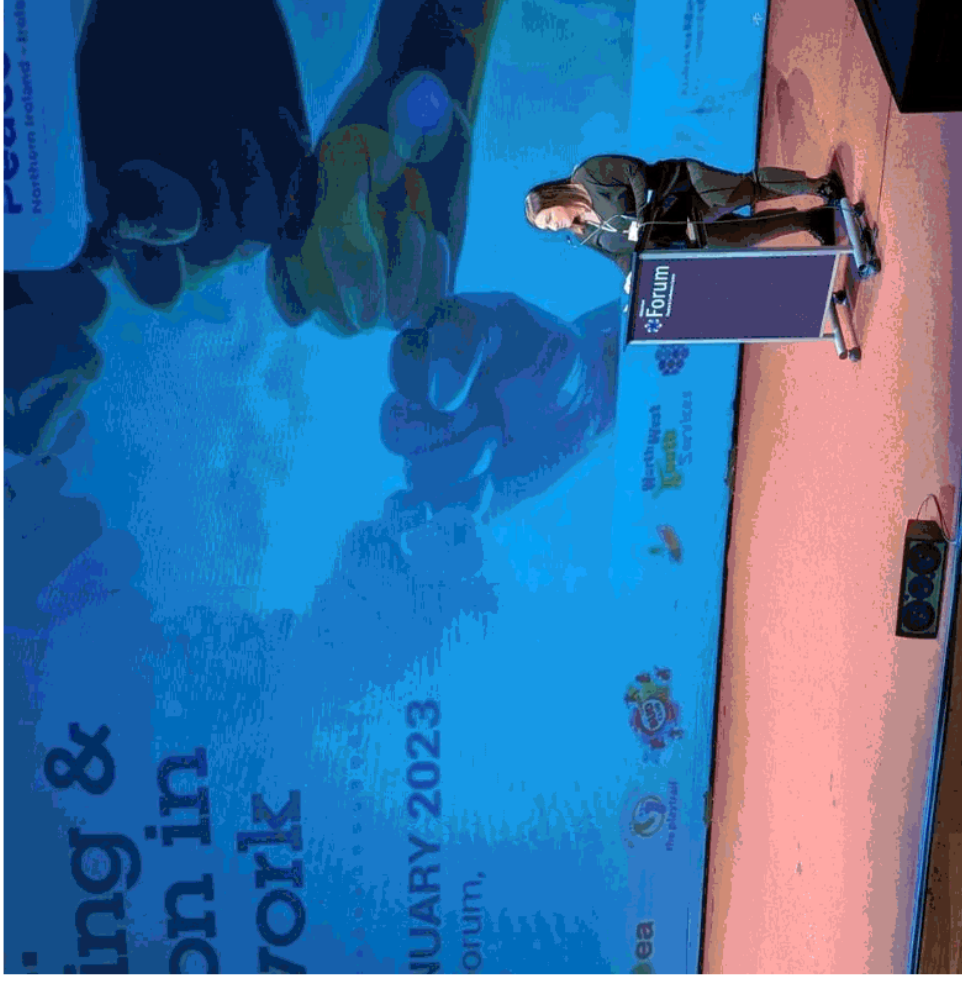
Introducing the Conference Team

Gavin Melly, Katrina McIlmail, Laurie Ferguson, Claire Heaney-McKee, Stephanie Craig, Narene Skeffington, Laura Grimes, Peter Nixon, Dr Breda Friel, Bridget O'Malley, John Lynch and Clare Maguire

Conference Photography by Christopher Fleming, Our Generation



John Lynch CEO Youth Work Alliance



Host Clare Maguire Youth Work Alliance

