



Linc
LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSION
IN THE EARLY YEARS
CEANNAIREACHT DO CHUIMSIÚ
SNA LUATHBHLIANTA



Final Evaluation of Phase One of the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme 2016-2020

LINC Consortium (2024) *Final Evaluation of Phase One of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme 2016–2020* (Kelly, L., Ring, E., Heaney, S., O’Sullivan, L., Fortune, N., Heaney, T., Kerrins, L. Stafford, P. and Thompson, H.), Limerick: Mary Immaculate College.



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DEDICATION

This publication is dedicated to the memory of Margaret Joyce, a highly regarded friend and colleague, and champion of Early Childhood Inclusive Education.

Reflecting on the Importance of Person First Language

Written by Margaret Joyce RIP

As I reflect on my own memories of Inclusion and Segregation living and going to school in a small town in the Midlands, where there was an Institutional residence for many people with diverse needs. As a child attending both primary and secondary school in the town in the 1970s and 1980s, I recall regularly meeting many of the people of Moore Abbey out in the local community walking with staff. As school-aged children we used the swimming pool in Moore Abbey as organised by our local schools. Unfortunately, some of my strongest memories are rather negative as we had almost a fear of meeting the people who lived there due to our lack of understanding and society's lack of discussing with us about those who lived there. While we often met the same people regularly we knew them as the 'special people' who lived in the town, we never knew their names or indeed really spoke to them. Unfortunately, this interaction or lack of was a learned response from observing the adults in our environment. This is why I am passionate about always seeing the child or person first, always addressing each child and adult by their name, and seeing their strengths and individual abilities first and foremost.

I recall, standing at a football match, two young professional mums standing beside me were speaking about their children's return to school in September. One mum said 'I believe that there is a down syndrome child and an autistic child in "Pat's class" this year!'. She continued to say 'I am sure this will cause great disruption in the whole class'. Sadly, this still shows a great lack of understanding even in today's society! If you overheard a similar conversation in your service, I urge you to avail of the opportunity to model good practice and address this stigma using appropriate language and to share your understanding of providing an inclusive environment for all children.

From the first module of the Leadership for Inclusion Programme (LINC level 6) which is titled *Inclusion in Early Years Settings: Concepts and Strategies*, our students are introduced to the importance of using Person First Language for the inclusion of all children and their families. Person First Language has been embraced in Ireland and is a central philosophy of the LINC Programme. Indeed, Person First Language is a great step in changing societal attitudes towards inclusion. It is so important as early childhood teachers to focus on the whole child and their strengths rather than on the child's additional needs.



In thinking forward to taking on the important role of INclusion CO-ordinator, using Person First Language will help you to enhance your role in leading an Inclusive Culture, Inclusive Practice and Inclusive Pedagogy. It is really important that you take the time to model the correct language with children, their families and indeed all staff in your setting, as this will reduce the stigma that can unfortunately occur as with the example about the football match I mentioned above!

As always, remember language is a very powerful tool both in the spoken and written word. It offers the child and family feelings of respect, dignity, compassion and sensitivity. It is important to familiarise yourself with the correct terminology and model this at all times. It is also important that language is not static so do keep yourself up to date with changes in the preferable use of language and changing terms through continuing CPD, such as the LINC Level 6 Programme, LINC CPD Programme and other training programmes. In using Person First Language always remember we must see the child as the unique and wonderful individual that they are first; use their name. Remember a child or person should never be defined by a label and we should always focus on their strengths and abilities rather than any additional needs they may have. Furthermore, in taking on the role of INclusion CO-ordinator it is really important to consider not only the importance of the spoken word but also the importance of the use of positive body language.

Some strategies to consider for the promotion of positive language

Use Visual Aids in your setting, clearly displayed for children.

The use of social stories, story sacks and puppets are really useful strategies also to model good practice and Person First Language with all children in a fun way.

If possible, display a poster on your notice board with correct use of language for parents and other professionals entering your service. You may be able to include this in your parents' handbook or discuss it at induction also. The earlier good practice is established the better.

Be mindful that children imitate the language used by adults around them so it is important that you use appropriate Person First Language around all children (Flood 2013). It is really important to remember that negative or inappropriate use of language contributes to poor self-image for the child.

As INclusion CO-ordinator always model good practice with all staff in your setting and keep staff updated on changing terms and appropriate terminology.

Ensure that you are knowledgeable and aware of appropriate language used in the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM), the The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Charter

and Guidelines for Early Childhood Care and Education, and indeed all other policy documents and guidelines.

Finally, always remember that a child's name should be the child's only label!

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The excellence achieved by the LINC Programme may be attributed primarily to the exceptional commitment of the thousands of LINC graduates and the early learning and care settings (ELCs) who have engaged with us on their LINC journey from 2016 to the present day. We continue to learn from our graduates who generously share their experiences with us and enable us to develop and enrich the LINC Programme from year to year. The wholehearted engagement of all LINC Programme participants in various surveys and research projects has enabled us to achieve our commitment to excellence in continuing to evaluate and review the programme. We would also like to acknowledge the children, parents and stakeholders who gave generously of their time to contribute to this evaluation.

The LINC Consortium remains committed to delivering a high-quality, student-centred programme that supports participants in cultivating inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in their respective settings. Mary Immaculate College retains responsibility for the academic quality of the LINC Programme, and the contribution of the external examining process in this regard has been outstanding. We are indebted to the external examiners who have supported us from the inception of the LINC Programme in achieving the highest standards across the programme. External examiners are appointed to programmes by the Academic Council of the University of Limerick. Prof Seamus Hegarty (Visiting Professor University of Warwick) and Prof Orla Doyle (University College Dublin) served as external examiners for the LINC Programme in the period 2016–2020. We are now fortunate to have Ruksana Beigi, University of East London; Professor Vasco D’Agnese, University of Campania Luigi Vanvitelli and Anna Mai Rooney, Centre for School Leadership as external examiners on the second iteration of the LINC Programme.

Without the outstanding colleagues on the LINC team, whose commitment to excellence has created a programme of remarkable quality, the LINC Programme would not have achieved its objectives to the level that it has.

Dr Linda Kelly, LINC Programme Researcher, Prof Emer Ring (MIC), Shirley Heaney, LINC National Programme Co-ordinator and Dr Lisha O’Sullivan (MIC) have led this final evaluation with the support of LINC Consortium colleagues Niamh Fortune, Teresa Heaney, Liz Kerrins and Patsy Stafford. The evaluation team would also like to acknowledge the contributions of previous LINC Programme Researchers Sarah Kelleher and Mary Brereton and external editor Christine O’Neill.

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A NOTE ON THE AUTHORS

Dr Linda Kelly is the LINC Programme Researcher for the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme. Linda also works as part of the Research and Data Analysis team at Early Childhood Ireland (ECI). Prior to joining the LINC team, she completed her PhD in Developmental Psychology at the Infant and Child Research Lab, Trinity College Dublin. Her thesis investigated how patterns of interaction between parents and children during play shape child development. Linda holds a joint BA in Psychology and French and an MSc in Applied Psychology. Her current research interests include observational methods in developmental psychology, play, child language development and inclusion.

Professor Emer Ring is Dean of Early Childhood and Teacher Education at Mary Immaculate College, Limerick. Emer’s previous professional experience spans the role of mainstream primary teacher, literacy and numeracy support teacher, teacher of children with special educational needs, senior Department of Education inspector and Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College (MIC). She has been principal investigator on a wide range of research projects, and her research interests include early childhood education, inclusion, child voice, pedagogy, autism, play and education law and policy development. Emer has presented and published widely in these areas. She is particularly proud to have been involved with the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme from its inception in 2016 across the dimensions of management, programme development and evaluation.

Shirley Heaney is the National Coordinator of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme. Shirley has worked with the LINC Programme since its inception in 2016 in a variety of roles, including programme delivery, development, evaluation and management. She has extensive experience in the area of inclusive practice in early childhood and has published in this area. Shirley’s research interests include inclusive practice, child well-being, universal design and professional development.

Dr Lisha O’Sullivan is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education and Head of the Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies at Mary Immaculate College (MIC). Lisha is a qualified play therapist and has extensive experience in the area of early childhood education. She has been involved in a number of national research projects, and her research interests include early years curriculum and pedagogy, inclusive education and the role of play in development. Lisha has presented and published widely in these areas. She has been involved with the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme since 2016, contributing in the areas of programme development, evaluation and management.

Niamh Fortune is Associate Professor in the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University specialising in the area of literacy. She is Head of Department and teaches language and literacy to undergraduate and postgraduate students in education. Before taking on the role of Head of Department, Niamh was the Bachelor of Education Programme Leader. She previously qualified as a primary school teacher and has a broad range of teaching experiences. Niamh is

Past President of The Literacy Association of Ireland. Her research interests include the teaching of reading and writing and developing literacy through play.

Teresa Heeney is Chief Executive Officer of Early Childhood Ireland and has held this role since March 2014. She led the merger of the Irish Preschool Play Association and the National Children’s Nurseries Association in 2011. Prior to that, Teresa worked as the manager of Cherish and as training and research manager in the ISPC, following roles in youth and community work. She received her undergraduate degree in social science from University College Cork and graduated with a Masters of Business Science from the National University of Ireland Maynooth in 2013. In 2017 Teresa completed the Professional Certificate in Governance with the Institute of Public Administration. She was a ministerial appointee to the Advisory Committee on Better Outcomes Brighter Futures for ten years until its dissolution in 2022. Teresa chairs the LINC Consortium steering group and is a board member of the South Dublin Childcare Committee.

Liz Kerrins is Director of Research with Early Childhood Ireland, where she has worked since 2019. She previously led on the Children’s Rights Alliance’s Early Childhood Education and Care programme of work. Liz is an experienced children’s researcher, social policy analyst and advocate. She has worked with the Children’s Research Centre, Trinity College; Society of St Vincent de Paul, National Office; Dublin Institute of Technology; and Threshold. She has published research reports, book chapters and journal articles on early childhood policy and services.

Patsy Stafford is Associate Professor and Deputy Head of Department at the Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education at Maynooth University. She has been involved with the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme from its inception in 2016. Patsy has been a researcher in a number of national research projects, and her research interests include early years curriculum and pedagogy, play and numeracy.

Helena Thompson is the Marketing, Communications and Recruitment Officer for the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme. Helena began working with the LINC Programme in February 2023 and has since developed and executed integrated marketing campaigns, leveraging digital and traditional channels to enhance the visibility of the LINC Programme. Prior to joining the LINC team, she completed her MSc in Digital Marketing Strategy with the Munster Technological University (MTU) which deepened her understanding of the rapidly evolving digital landscape. Helena holds a BA in New Media and English from the University of Limerick (UL).

GLOSSARY	
AIM	Access and Inclusion Model
CECDE	Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
DCEDIY	Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
ECCE	Early Childhood Care and Education
ECEC	Early Childhood Education and Care
ECI	Early Childhood Ireland
EDI	Equality, Diversity and Inclusion
ELC	Early Learning and Care
EYEPU	Early Years Education Policy Unit
EYS	Early Years Specialists
Gol	Government of Ireland
ICT	Information and Communication Technology

IDG	Interdepartmental Group
INCO	INclusion CO-ordinator
LINC	Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years
MIC	Mary Immaculate College
MIREC	Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee
MU Froebel Dept.	Maynooth University Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education
NCCA	National Council for Curriculum and Assessment
NCSE	National Council for Special Education
NFQ	National Framework of Qualifications
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
RfT	Request for Tender
UL	University of Limerick

TERMINOLOGY	
Early Learning and Care Settings	Settings providing early education and care to children prior to their commencing primary school.
Early Childhood Teachers	Staff working in settings providing early education and care to children prior to their commencing primary school. In accordance with the rationale adopted in the <i>Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme</i> , ¹ a measured decision was made by the Consortium to adopt the term 'early childhood teacher' for the LINConso Programme. This decision was based on John Dewey's concept of the 'teacher' as an interpreter and guide as the child re-enacts, rediscovers and reconstructs his/her experience on a daily basis. The Consortium believes that this term best describes the role of all those who work with children in ELC services. ² However, the Consortium also acknowledges that terminology is inextricably linked to the wider issue of professionalisation, an examination of which remains outside the remit of this evaluation.
Early Learning and Care Practitioners	Terminology to describe early childhood teachers, adopted by the <i>First 5: A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019–2028</i> (Government of Ireland 2018).
In this research report, a focus is maintained on the use of terminology that celebrates difference and acknowledges all of our differences as human beings. The creation of inclusive education systems able to respond appropriately to human differences remains critical in fashioning a system where diversity becomes the norm. ³	

¹ LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme* (Ring, E., Kelleher, S., Breen, F., Heeney, T., McLoughlin, M., Kearns, A., Stafford, P., Skehill, S., Campion, K., Comerford, D. and O'Sullivan, L.), Limerick: Mary Immaculate College, Available at: <https://lincprogramme.ie/research>.

² Camp Mayhew, K. and Camp Edwards, A. (1936) *The Dewey school. The laboratory school of the University of Chicago 1896–1903*, New York: D. Appleton-Century Co.

³ Ring, E. and O'Sullivan, L. (2019) 'Creating spaces where diversity is the norm', *Childhood Education*, 95(2), 29–39, DOI: 10.1080/00094056.2019.1593758.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a Consortium led by Mary Immaculate College (MIC) together with Early Childhood Ireland (ECI) and Maynooth University (MU) Froebel Department of Primary and Early Childhood Education successfully responded to a cross-government⁴ call for proposals to develop a national higher education programme for INclusion CO-ordinators (INCOs) in early years settings. This call for proposals was linked to the development of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)⁵ which encompasses both universal and targeted approaches to support the inclusion of all children in early learning and care (ELC) settings. Notably, the contribution of a qualified and competent workforce to creating inclusive ELC settings in which all children can achieve their potential is specifically acknowledged at Level 3 of the AIM (see Figure 1). This has been further highlighted and endorsed by a recent publication entitled *Nurturing skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care and School-age Childcare*.⁶

Aligning with the growing demand for professionalisation in the ELC sector, in early 2016, the Consortium was allocated €5.5 million which it focused on designing a high-quality programme to support early childhood teachers in creating inclusive ELC settings. Encompassing the key foci of both leadership and inclusion, the programme is deliberately referred to as the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme and the consortium as the LINC Consortium. The LINC Programme is located at Level 6 of the National Qualifications Framework (NFQ)⁷ and academically accredited by the University of Limerick (UL) through MIC.



Figure 1. Access and Inclusion Model (Inter-Departmental Group 2015)

Since its establishment, the LINC Programme has gained national recognition and has received multiple awards for excellence (see Appendix A for an overview of these awards). The awards acknowledge the LINC Programme as an innovator in online adult learning, reflect the hard work of the LINC Programme team in creating positive learning experiences for students and are a testament to the quality of the LINC Programme. The awards also contribute to the LINC Steering Group's communications strategy which seeks to promote the programme nationally in order to ensure sufficient applications to fill its annual intake requirements, in addition to building the LINC brand and reputation in the field of inclusion.

LINC Programme Evaluation

A commitment to an ongoing programme review, reflection and evaluation was central to the proposal submitted by the LINC Consortium in 2015. Commensurate with this commitment, on June 17, 2019, an interim evaluation of the LINC Programme⁸ was launched in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) by then Minister Katherine Zappone TD.

⁸ LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme* (Ring, E., Kelleher, S., Breen, F., Heeney, T., McLoughlin, M., Kearns, A., Stafford, P., Skehill, S., Campion, K., Comerford, D. and O'Sullivan, L.), Limerick: Mary Immaculate College, Available at: <https://lincprogramme.ie/research>.

⁴ Department of Children and Youth Affairs; Department of Education and Skills; Department of Health and the Higher Education Authority. See Appendix A, pp.136–152: LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme* (Ring, E., Kelleher, S., Breen, F., Heeney, T., McLoughlin, M., Kearns, A., Stafford, P., Skehill, S., Campion, K., Comerford, D. and O'Sullivan, L.), Limerick: Mary Immaculate College, available at: <https://lincprogramme.ie/research>.

⁵ Inter-Departmental Group (2015) *Supporting access to the early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme for children with a disability*, Dublin: Inter-Departmental Group, available at: <https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/Inter-Departmental-Group-Report-launched-Nov-2015.pdf>

⁶ Government of Ireland (2022) *Nurturing skills: The workforce plan for early learning and care and school-age childcare 2022–2028*, Dublin: Government of Ireland, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/97056-nurturing-skills-the-workforce-plan-for-early-learning-and-care-elic-and-school-age-childcare-sac-2022-2028/>

⁷ See: <https://www.qqi.ie/what-we-do/the-qualifications-system/national-framework-of-qualifications>

The LINC Programme Interim Evaluation focused on the LINC Programme outcomes during its first two years as it progressed in its goal of effecting qualitative shifts in participants' knowledge(s), practices, and values as they apply to leading inclusion in ELC settings.⁹ In 2020, the LINC Consortium was allocated a further €3.6 million of government funding to extend the LINC Programme for practising early childhood teachers by a further three years. This contract has now been extended up to the end of 2024, with a final cohort of students to be admitted for the academic year 2024/2025. In addition, the Consortium was allocated funding to develop a continuing professional development (CPD) programme for graduates of the LINC Level 6 Programme to support the role of INCO further. This CPD programme is currently being evaluated by the Consortium together with the second iteration of the Level 6 LINC Programme, which commenced in 2020.

The LINC Consortium remains dedicated to carrying out ongoing evaluations of the LINC Programme in order to ensure that it continues to meet the needs of its participants and is effective in supporting early childhood teachers in their practice of including all children fully in ELC settings. The present evaluation report details the LINC Programme's progress in achieving these aims during its first phase, focusing primarily on the 2018–2020 period. This two-year period saw 1,762 students successfully graduate from the programme with a total of 3,461 graduating from the programme in its first four years (2016–2020).

⁹ Urban, M., Robson, S. and Scacchi, V. (2017) *Review of occupational role profiles in Ireland in early childhood education and care*, Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, available at: <https://assets.gov.ie/24908/d9cb10bb2d9141f5b5288722ea13194c.pdf>; Urban, M., Vandebroek, M., Van Laere, K., Lazzari, A. and Peeters, J. (2012) *Competence requirements in early childhood education and care. Final report*, Brussels: European Commission, available at: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED534599.pdf>

LINC Programme Competency Framework

The present evaluation makes frequent reference to the LINC Programme Competency Framework for Inclusion in ELC (see Appendix B). The Competency Framework forms the basis of students' learning on the LINC Programme and provides guidance for the application of this learning to practice under its three pillars – inclusive culture (where children are welcomed and valued as evident in the preschool environment, the settings' policies, and partnership with parents); inclusive practice (where transitions are supported and the expertise of the early years team is utilised and enhanced by training opportunities); and inclusive pedagogy (whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner and are documented effectively to identify needs).

The Competency Framework is operationalised through maintaining a focus on the three dimensions of knowledge(s), practices and values and their relevance to the four broad and interrelated areas of working with children; working with families and communities; working with other professionals and institutions; and early childhood in the wider local, national and international context.¹⁰ The Competency Framework is an evidence-based evolving framework located in national and international contemporary research and influenced by the view of inclusive education outlined by Booth and Ainscow¹¹ and expressed by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), as 'producing inclusive policies; evolving inclusive practices; and creating inclusive cultures at the level of the school'.¹²

¹⁰ Urban et al. (2017) *Review of occupational role profiles in Ireland in early childhood education and care*; Urban et al. (2012) *Competence requirements in early childhood education and care*.

¹¹ Booth, T. and Ainscow, M. (2000) *The index for inclusion*, Bristol: Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education, available at: <http://www.csie.org.uk/resources/breaking-barriers.shtml>

¹² National Council for Special Education (2006) *Implementation report: Plan for the phased implementation of the EPSEN act 2004*, Trim: National Council for Special Education, p. 34, available at: https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/ncse_imp_report.pdf

Structure of the Report

Following on from the LINC Programme interim evaluation 2019, the evaluation is based on Guskey’s five critical levels of data collection and analysis¹³ detailed in Figure 2 below.



Figure 2. Guskey’s (2002) model for CPD programme evaluation

Guskey’s model was adapted by the research team to align both with the questions posed by the evaluation and the methodological approach that was adopted. The adapted version focuses on participants’ reactions in terms of the appropriateness of the programme content and process in meeting their needs; participants’ learning; organisational support and change; participants’ use of new knowledge and skills; and outcomes for children in order to evaluate how well the LINC Programme is progressing in meeting its aims.

For a detailed discussion of the LINC Programme evaluation approach, please refer to the LINC Programme interim evaluation, published in 2019.¹⁴ A summary of the methodological approach of the LINC Programme evaluation is presented in Table 1. The interim phase of the LINC Programme evaluation focused on strands 1–5 of this

¹³ Guskey, T.R. (2002a), ‘Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development’, *Educational Leadership*, 59(6), 45-51, available at:

https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=edp_facpub.

¹⁴ LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme* (Ring, E., Kelleher, S., Breen, F., Heeney, T., McLoughlin, M., Kearns, A., Stafford, P., Skehill, S., Campion, K., Comerford, D. and O’Sullivan, L.), Limerick: Mary Immaculate College, Available at: <https://lincprogramme.ie/research>.

approach only and provided initial evidence that the broad aim of the programme in seeking to effect qualitative shifts across the three dimensions of knowledge(s); practices and values in leading inclusive culture, inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy in ELC settings was being achieved. The current phase of the evaluation presents data collected as part of strands 6–7 of this overall evaluation strategy in addition to further data collected as part of strands 1–4 following on from the time period of the LINC Programme interim evaluation.

Table 1. Summary of the multi-method evaluation approach of the LINC Programme

Strand	Research method	Overview	Time frame
1	Literature review	Key components of effective inclusion in ELC; teacher competencies for inclusion; blended learning	2016–2020
2	Participant questionnaires	Online module satisfaction surveys; overall programme evaluation survey	2016–2020
3	Employer questionnaire	Online survey for managers of students participating in programme	2017–2020
4	Documentary analysis	Analysis of programme materials, assessment data, awards; analysis of quality control visits	2017–2020
5	Discourse analysis	Analysis of blogs completed by LINC tutors and LINC graduates	2018
6	Semi-structured interviews	Consultation with key stakeholders (graduates, parents, informants from agencies with responsibility for ELC policy and/or practice); LINC tutors	2018–2020
7	Case studies	Exploring and Telling ¹⁵ approach used to elicit child voice	2019–2020

Whilst levels 1–3 of Guskey’s adapted framework for evaluating CPD were the focus of the LINC Programme interim evaluation, the current phase of the research captures data from all five levels, providing preliminary insights into the significance of the LINC Programme for early years teachers, settings, families and children.

¹⁵ Ring, E., O’Sullivan, L., O’Keeffe, S., Ferris, F. and Wall, E. (2019) *An evaluation of the Teach Me As I Am early years programme*, Dublin: AsIAM, available at: <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TeachMeAsIAM-booklet.pdf>

The current phase of the research provides an overview of the findings from online surveys investigating the satisfaction of participants and their employers with the LINC Programme, presented in Chapters 2–4. Chapter 5 outlines the findings from the programme’s quality assurance assessments. Insights from interviews with LINC Programme tutors and key stakeholders are presented in Chapter 6 and 7, respectively. Finally, children’s perspectives on inclusion are discussed in Chapter 8. In order to report findings in a consistent manner throughout the report, the list of magnitude descriptors in Table 2 below has been devised, with corresponding percentages of participants denoted by each magnitude descriptor.

Table 2. *Magnitude descriptors adopted to quantify numbers of participants*

Quantifying term	% of total participants denoted
Almost all	91–100%
Most	76–90%
The majority	51–75%
Many	31–50%
Some	16–30%
A few	1–15%

Please note that all participant quotations included in the report are presented verbatim.

The timeliness of this evaluation is significant in the Irish context in view of the publication of the *End-of-three-year Evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model*¹⁶ and the publication of *Nurturing Skills: The Workforce Plan for Early Learning and Care*

¹⁶ Robinson, D., Gowers, S.J., Codina, G., Artess, J., Antonio Delgado Fuentes, M., Mycock, K., Qureshi, S., Shepherd, R., and Ni Luanaigh, I. (2024) *End-of-three-year evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model*: Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/281416/efef74fb-04d6-4f8b-ba80-f7af48c6d8b1.pdf>

and School-age Childcare 2022–2028.¹⁷ It is also envisaged that the findings of the present evaluation will contribute to the realisation of the goal of an effective early childhood system articulated in *First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019–2028*.¹⁸



¹⁷ Government of Ireland (2022) *Nurturing skills: The workforce plan for early learning and care and school-age childcare 2022–2028*, Dublin : Government of Ireland, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/97056-nurturing-skills-the-workforce-plan-for-early-learning-and-care-elc-and-school-age-childcare-sac-2022-2028/>

¹⁸ Government of Ireland (2018) *First 5: A whole-of-government strategy for babies, young children and their families 2019–2028*, Dublin: Government Publications Office, available at: https://first5.gov.ie/userfiles/pdf/5223_4966_DCYA_EarlyYears_INTERACTIVE_Booklet_280x215_v1.pdf#view=fit.

CHAPTER 2: PARTICIPANT SURVEYS

Programme participants were contacted via email to partake in anonymous surveys related to their experience of the various modules of the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme as well as an end-of-year overall programme evaluation. A copy of a module evaluation survey together with a participants' programme evaluation survey is provided in Appendices C and D. An information note explained the survey's purpose, emphasised the voluntary and confidential nature of participation, and provided contact details for LINC Programme personnel and the Mary Immaculate College Research Ethics Committee (MIREC). Table 3 details the surveys distributed to students in 2018/19 and 2019/20. Participants had approximately one month to complete each survey. This chapter discusses the findings from the module surveys of the 2018/19 and 2019/20 cohorts of students. Finally, findings from the overall programme evaluation surveys from 2018/19 and 2019/20 are presented.

Table 3. Participant surveys distributed in 2018/19 and 2019/20

M1	Inclusion in Early Years Settings: Concepts and Strategies
M2	Child Development
M3	Promoting Collaborative Practice for Inclusion in Early Childhood Care and Education
M4	Curriculum for Inclusion
M5	Leadership for Inclusion
M6	Portfolio
Overall Programme Evaluation	

Participant Questionnaires 2018/19: Key Findings

Table 4 provides an overview of the proportion of students who completed each survey as part of the 2018/19 evaluation of the LINC Programme. Overall response rates for the individual module surveys, excluding modules from which participants could seek an exemption, ranged from 22%–36%. Exemption modules give due recognition to prior learning at a higher level and allow learners to apply for an exemption from two specific modules – Child Development and Curriculum for Inclusion. These exemptions were agreed with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) when the programme commenced to address dissatisfaction that emerged from the early learning and care (ELC) sector in relation to potential participants with prior qualifications being obliged to repeat some module content. Students who are granted an exemption are, however, provided with full access to both exemption module materials, and they may engage with the material if they wish. Proportional data presented on the exemption modules are therefore based on lower numbers of participants compared to data presented on compulsory modules. The overall programme evaluation was completed by 25% of LINC Programme participants in the 2018/19 period.

Table 4. Students' survey response rates 2018/19

Module	Invited	Completed	Proportion completed
M1	982	353	36%
M2*	400	213	53%
M3	969	212	22%
M4*	553	171	31%
M5	969	280	29%
M6	969	326–339	34–35%
Overall Programme Evaluation	969	241	25%

Notes. Not all participants responded to every question on the M6 survey.

* denotes an exemption module.

The module evaluation surveys consisted of Likert scale questions in addition to one open-ended question. These questions focused on participants' overall satisfaction with each module; satisfaction with specific aspects of the module (e.g. application to practice; tutor support); satisfaction with aspects of the in-person sessions (e.g. content and delivery; quality of facilities); and how well the module prepared participants to lead inclusion in their ELC setting.

Participant Overall Satisfaction across Modules 1–6

Participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with each module on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Satisfaction was high across each of the six modules in 2018/19. The proportion of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied ranged from 85.37%–94.65% across the six modules. Responses are summarised in Figure 3 and Table 5 below.

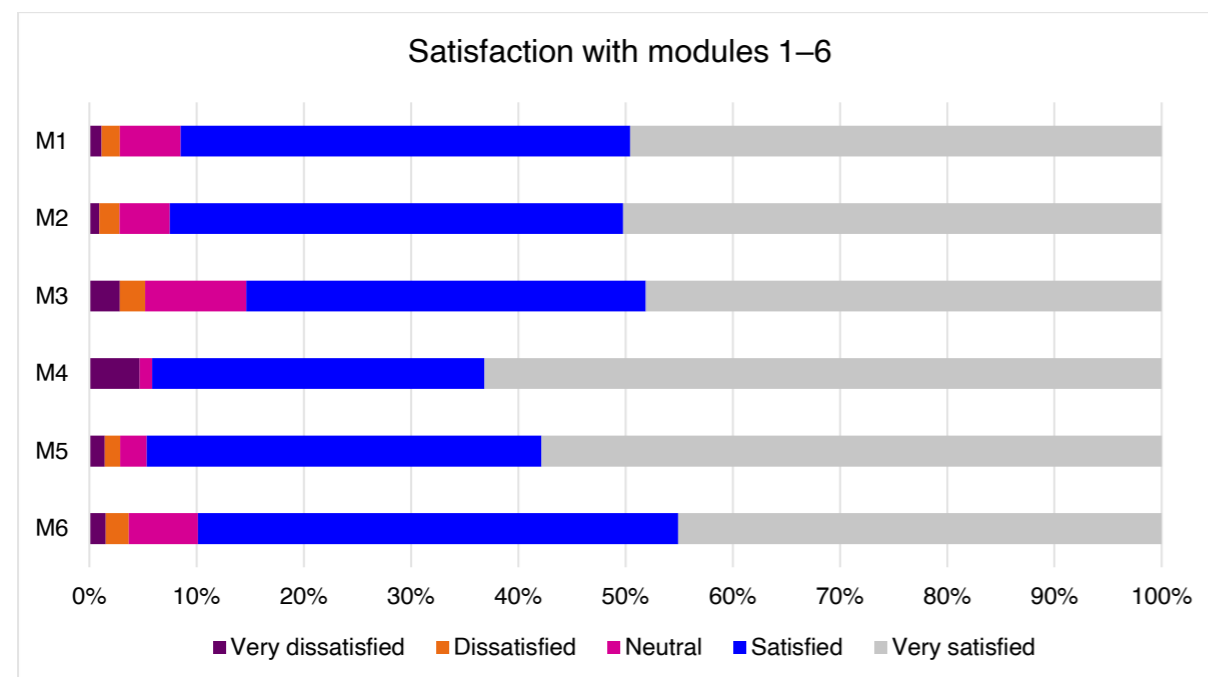


Figure 3. Participant satisfaction with modules 1–6 in 2018/19

Table 5. Participant satisfaction with modules 1–6 in 2018/19

Module	% Satisfied/Very satisfied	Number of respondents
M1	91.51%	323
M2	92.48%	197
M3	85.37%	181
M4	94.15%	161
M5	94.65%	265
M6	89.88%	293

Satisfaction with Aspects of Modules

Participants were next asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction with the content; difficulty; resources (e.g. library access, additional readings, videos etc.); assessment; time frame; application to practice; and tutor support across each of the six modules. The responses are presented in Figure 4. Participants demonstrated the highest levels of satisfaction with the tutor support across the six modules (93.21%–97.86% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied) and lower satisfaction with the difficulty of modules 1–6 (70.89%–83.22% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied). Please see Appendix E, Table 15 for the precise breakdown of participant satisfaction across each aspect of modules 1–6.

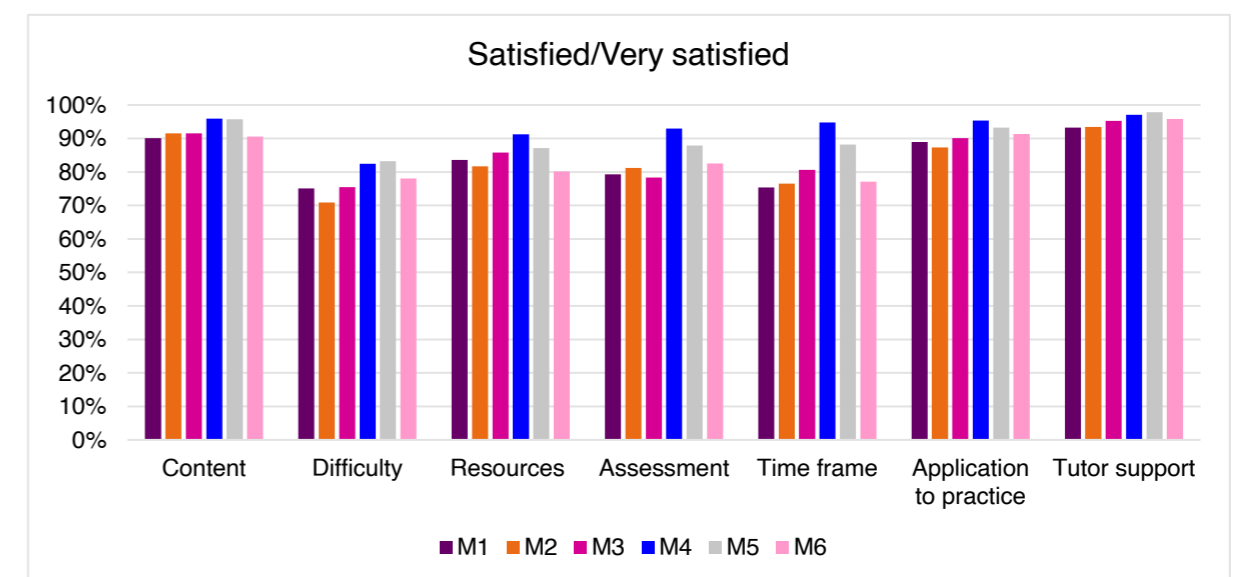


Figure 4. Satisfaction with aspects of modules 1–6 in 2018/19

Satisfaction with Face-to-Face Sessions

Participants were asked to indicate their level of satisfaction with various aspects of the face-to-face sessions. Guskey¹⁹ emphasised that alongside content and delivery, factors such as room comfort, facilities and venue accessibility contribute to students' overall experience and satisfaction with a programme of professional learning. The proportions of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied with various aspects of the face-to-face sessions of modules 1–6 in 2018/19 are illustrated in Figure 5.

Participants demonstrated the highest levels of satisfaction with the content and delivery of the sessions (86.97%–98.25% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied) and lower satisfaction with the lunch options nearby (59.64%–66.03% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied). Please see Appendix E, Table 16 for a precise breakdown of participants' responses across each module.

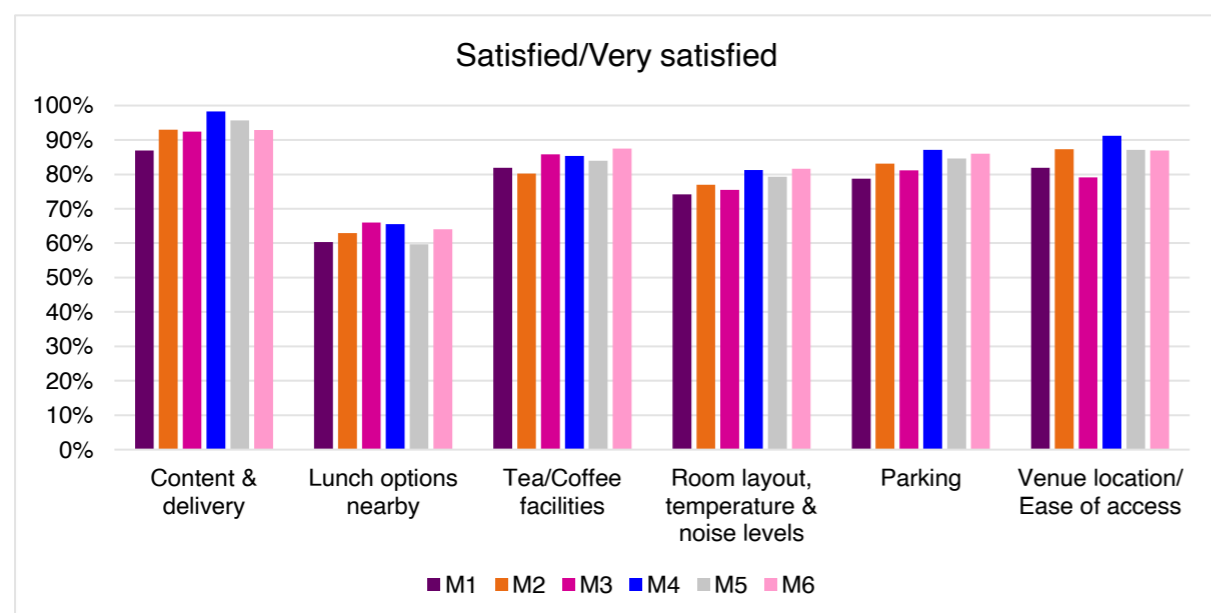


Figure 5. Satisfaction with face-to-face sessions in 2018/19

Participant Questionnaires 2019/20: Key Findings

Table 6 provides an overview of the proportion of students who completed each survey as part of the 2019/20 cohort programme evaluation. Overall response rates, excluding the modules where participants could seek an exemption, ranged from 17%–49%, with 16% of LINC Programme participants completing the overall programme evaluation. Response rates declined from module 5 onwards, which may indicate questionnaire fatigue. Despite this decline, an adequate response rate was maintained, from which reasonable conclusions may be drawn.²⁰

Table 6. Survey response rates 2019/20

Module	Invited	Completed	Proportion completed
M1	923	454	49%
M2*	450	183	41%
M3	908	283	31%
M4*	566	158	28%
M5	894	156	17%
M6	894	170–180	19–20%
Overall Programme Evaluation	894	146	16%

Notes. Not all participants responded to every question of the M6 survey. * denotes an exemption module.

The module evaluation surveys followed the same format as those pertaining to the 2018/19 cohort. Minor adaptations were made to the module 5 and module 6 surveys due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which necessitated moving the face-to-face sessions online. This will be discussed in more detail below.

²⁰ Nulty, D. D. (2008) 'The adequacy of response rates to online and paper surveys: What can be done?', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(3), 301–314, DOI: 10.1080/02602930701293231

¹⁹ Guskey, T.R. (2002b) *Evaluating professional development*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Participant Overall Satisfaction across Modules 1–6

Satisfaction was high across each of the six modules in 2019/20 as illustrated in Figure 6 and Table 7 below. The proportion of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied ranged from 81.98%–95.16% across the six modules. Participant levels of satisfaction were similar to those observed in 2018/19, which ranged from 85.37%–94.65%, as illustrated previously in Figure 3.

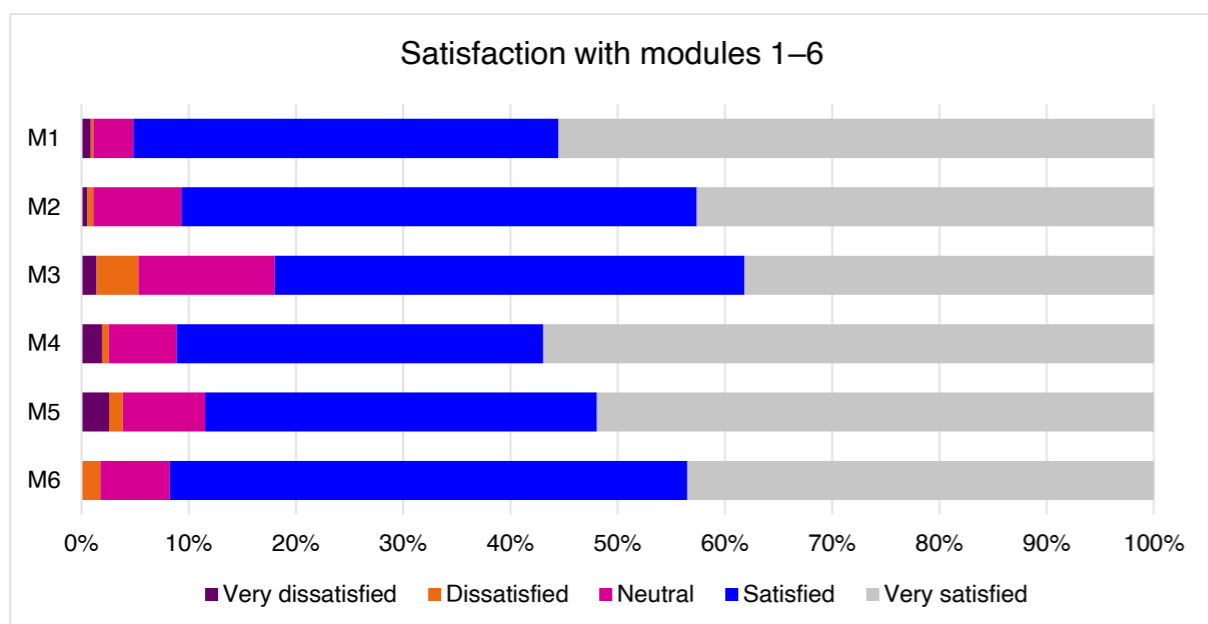


Figure 6. Participant satisfaction with modules 1–6 in 2019/20

Table 7. Participant satisfaction with modules 1–6 in 2019/20

Module	% Satisfied/Very satisfied	Number of respondents
M1	95.16%	432
M2	90.71%	166
M3	81.98%	232
M4	91.14%	144
M5	88.46%	138
M6	91.77%	156

Satisfaction with Aspects of Modules

Figure 7 illustrates the proportion of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied with the various aspects of modules 1–6 in 2019/2020. Similar to 2018/19, participants demonstrated the highest levels of satisfaction with the tutor support across the six modules (94.41%–97.58% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied) and lower satisfaction with the difficulty of modules 1–6 (68.86%–82.28% of participants were satisfied/very satisfied). Please see Appendix E, Table 17 for the precise breakdown of participant satisfaction across each module.



Figure 7. Satisfaction with aspects of modules 1–6 in 2019/20

Satisfaction with Face-to-Face Sessions

Figure 8 details participants' levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the face-to-face sessions of modules 1–4 in 2019/20. The proportion of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied with the identified aspects of the face-to-face sessions of modules 1–4 ranged from 62.54%–96.04%. This is similar to satisfaction levels recorded in 2018/19, which ranged from 59.64%–98.25%. The findings appear consistent across the four modules, and similar to 2018/19, participants demonstrated the highest levels of satisfaction with the content and delivery of the sessions (93.44%–96.04% were satisfied/very satisfied) and lower satisfaction with the lunch options nearby (62.54%–71.37% were satisfied/very satisfied).

Please see Appendix E, Table 18 for a precise breakdown of participants' responses across each module in 2019/20.

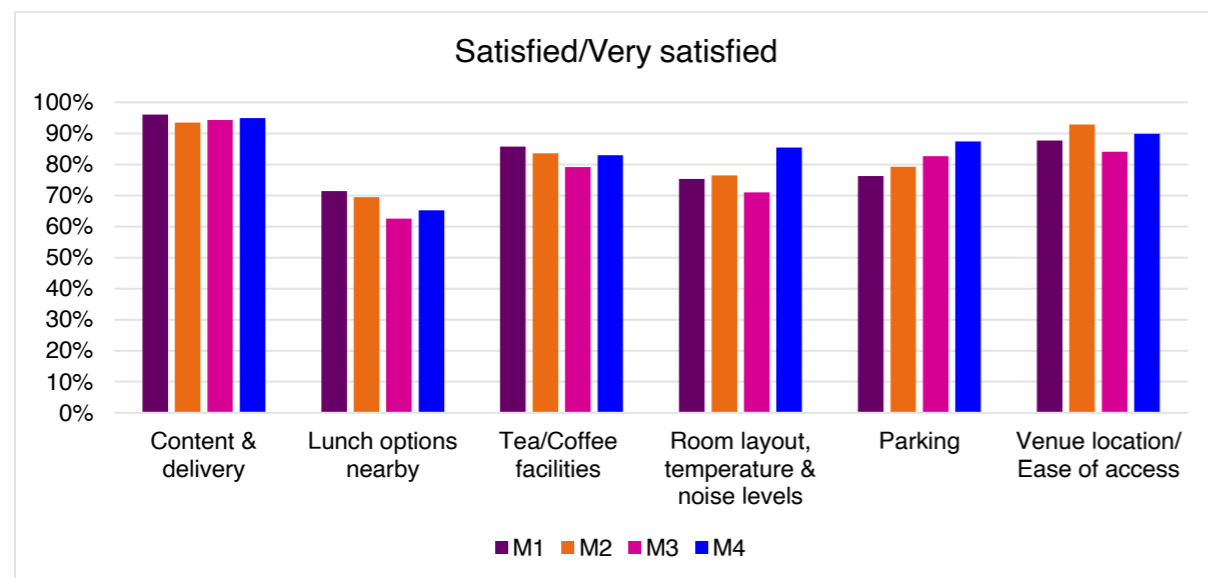


Figure 8. Satisfaction with face-to-face sessions of modules 1–4 in 2019/20

Modules 5 and 6 were delivered online due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated government-mandated restrictions which came into force in March 2020. As a result, the face-to-face sessions for module 5 and module 6 were pre-recorded and available for participants to access on Moodle. This meant that only participant satisfaction with the content and delivery of these sessions could be measured for these modules. Findings in relation to participants' satisfaction with the content and delivery of modules 5 and 6 are presented in Figure 9.

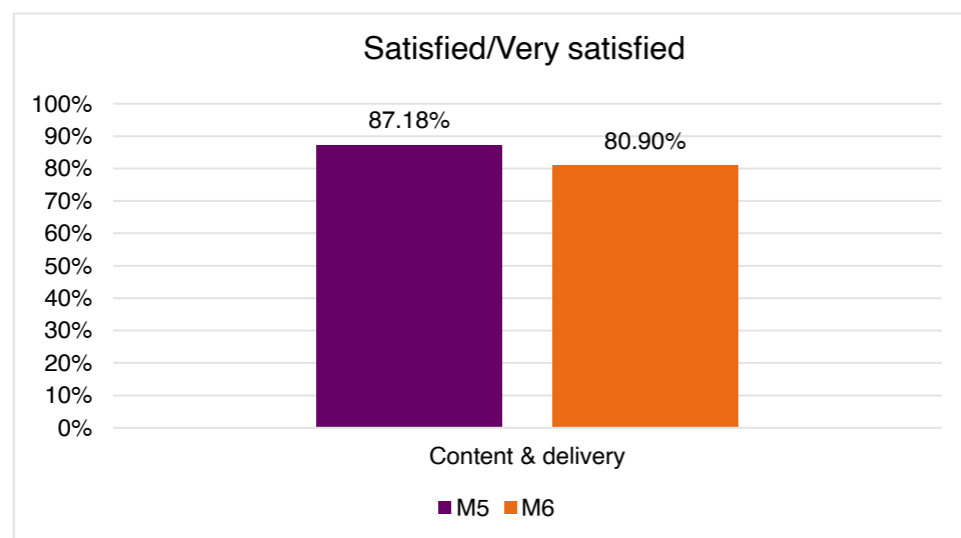


Figure 9. Satisfaction with online sessions of modules 5–6 in 2019/20

Although satisfaction with the content and delivery of the face-to-face sessions remained high across modules 5 and 6, it was lower overall compared to modules 1–4, which obtained satisfaction ratings ranging from 93.44%–96.04%. 18% ($n = 8$) of additional comments provided by participants in the module 5 evaluation survey expressed that participants missed the face-to-face format, particularly the interactions with their tutor and peers. The two comments below are indicative of participants' observations in this regard:

I really enjoyed this module and found it very interesting and useful. I really missed the face-to-face learning experience that we usually have at the beginning of every module with the tutor and the class interactions forming a vital part to the overall learning from the module.

Participant comment on M5

I think that the group meetings with the face-to-face are so important, it was unfortunate due to Covid-19 that they could not go ahead. The face-to-face group discussions on the day are a great group learning experience.

Participant comment on M5

While in essence the LINC Programme was COVID-resistant in terms of the online element of the programme, it is noteworthy that the participants considered the face-to-face sessions central to their experience as learners on the programme.



Programme Evaluation Questionnaires 2018/19 and 2019/20: Key Findings

At the end of each academic year, participants were invited to take part in an overall programme evaluation. It is important to note that there was a decrease in the number of participants who responded to the overall programme evaluation from 2018/19 to 2019/20. Of the students invited to take part, 16% responded to the overall programme evaluation in 2019/20 compared to 25% in 2018/19 (see Tables 4 and 6).

Profile of Participants

Participants were asked to indicate their highest qualification level to date. The education profiles of survey respondents in 2018/19 and 2019/20 are detailed in Figure 10 below.

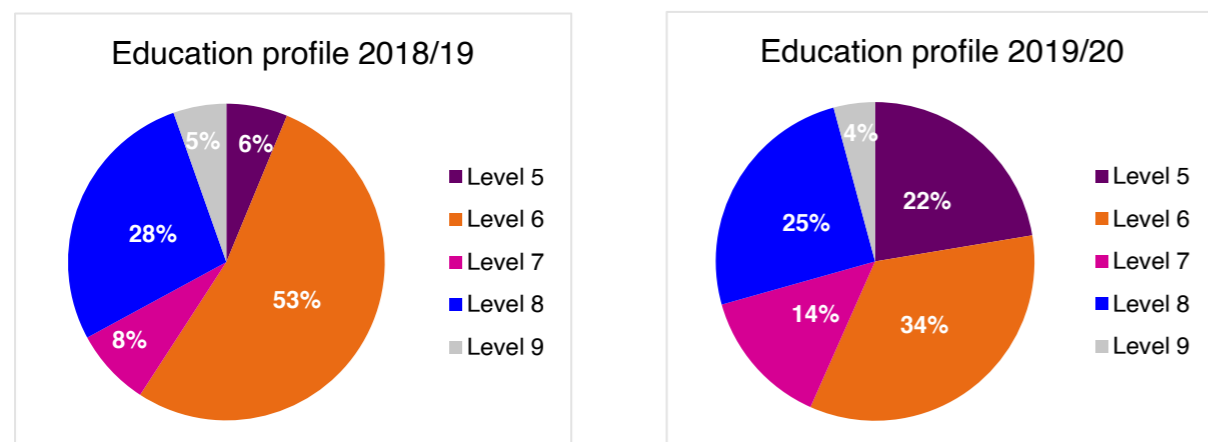


Figure 10. Education profiles of 2018/19 and 2019/20 cohorts

With regard to the level of qualification of survey respondents in 2018/19 and 2019/20, figures are consistent with data compiled by the Pobal 2018/2019²¹ and 2019/20²² annual early years surveys, which indicated that the majority of the ELC workforce holds a Level 6 certificate or higher.

²¹ Pobal (2019) *Early years sector profile 2018/2019*, available at: <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2019/12/Annual-Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-AEYSPR-2018-19.pdf>

²² Pobal (2021) *Early years sector profile 2019/2020*, available at: <https://www.pobal.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/Annual-Early-Years-Sector-Profile-Report-201920.pdf>

Satisfaction with LINC Programme Overall

Participants were asked to rate their overall satisfaction with the LINC Programme on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). As seen in Figure 11, levels of satisfaction were comparable across the 2018/19 and 2019/20 cohorts. In 2018/19, 97.51% of participants responded that they were satisfied/very satisfied with the programme overall compared to 95.89% in 2019/20. The breakdown of participant responses is provided in Table 8.

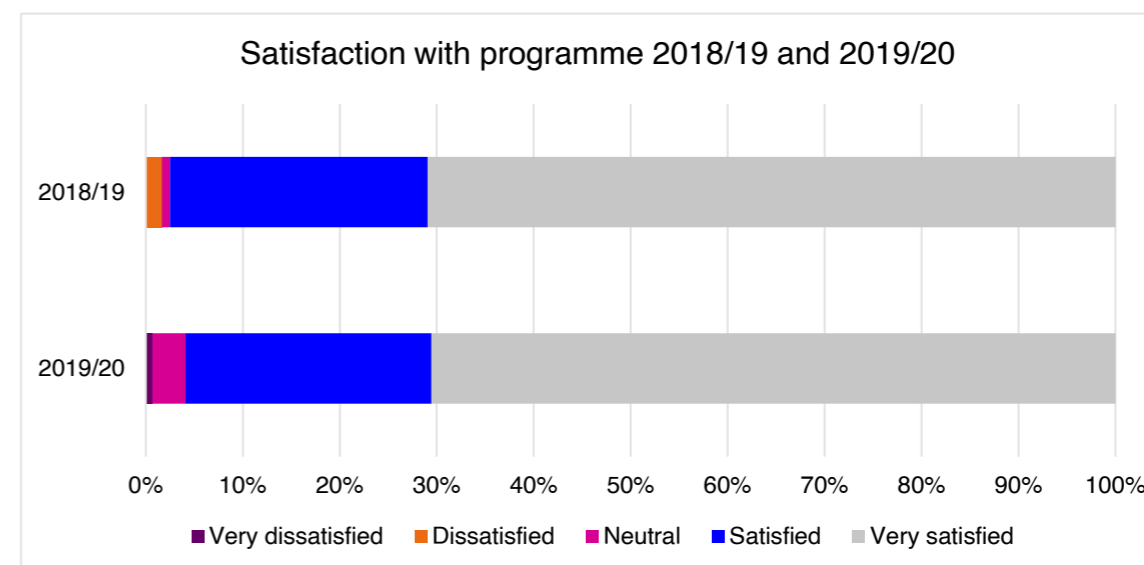


Figure 11. Overall satisfaction with LINC Programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Table 8. Participant satisfaction with the LINC Programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
2018/19	0.00% (n = 0)	1.66% (n = 4)	0.83% (n = 2)	26.56% (n = 64)	70.95% (n = 171)
2019/20	0.68% (n = 1)	0.00% (n = 0)	3.42% (n = 5)	25.34% (n = 37)	70.55% (n = 103)

Preparation to Lead in Inclusion

Participants were asked to rate how well they felt the LINC Programme prepared them to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency in their respective ELC settings: inclusive culture (where children are welcomed and valued as evident in the preschool environment, the settings’ policies and partnership with parents); inclusive practice (where transitions are supported and the expertise of the early years team is utilised and enhanced by training opportunities); and inclusive pedagogy (whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner and are documented effectively to identify needs).

There was a slight increase in participants’ preparedness to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency from the 2018/2019 to the 2019/2020 period. Figure 12 illustrates the proportion of participants who felt well or very well prepared to lead in inclusion in their ELC setting upon completion of the LINC Programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20. See Appendix E, Tables 19 and 20 for the breakdown of how well participants felt each individual module of the programme prepared them to lead inclusion in their settings in 2018/2019 and 2019/2020, respectively.

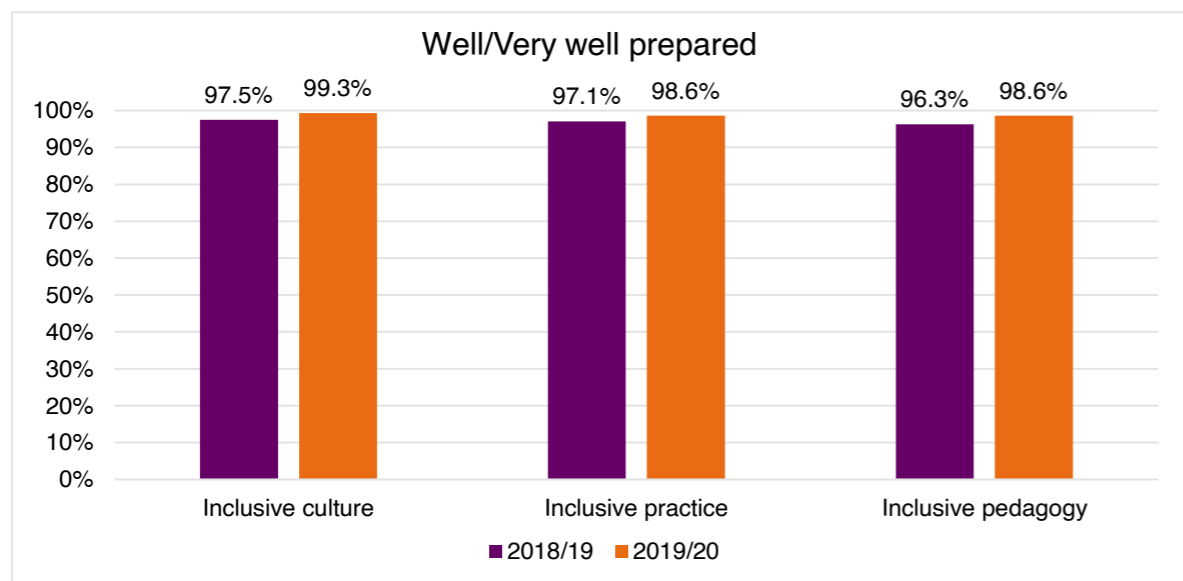


Figure 12. Participant preparedness to lead in inclusion in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Satisfaction with Aspects of Programme

Figure 13 demonstrates the proportion of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied with various aspects of the programme across both cohorts. Satisfaction levels increased slightly in relation to the programme’s content and time frame from the 2018/19 to the 2019/20 period. On the other hand, satisfaction with programme difficulty and assessment decreased from 2018/19 to 2019/20. Tutor support continued to achieve an exceptionally high rating, with 98% of participants indicating that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the level of tutor support in 2018/19 compared to 97% in 2019/20.

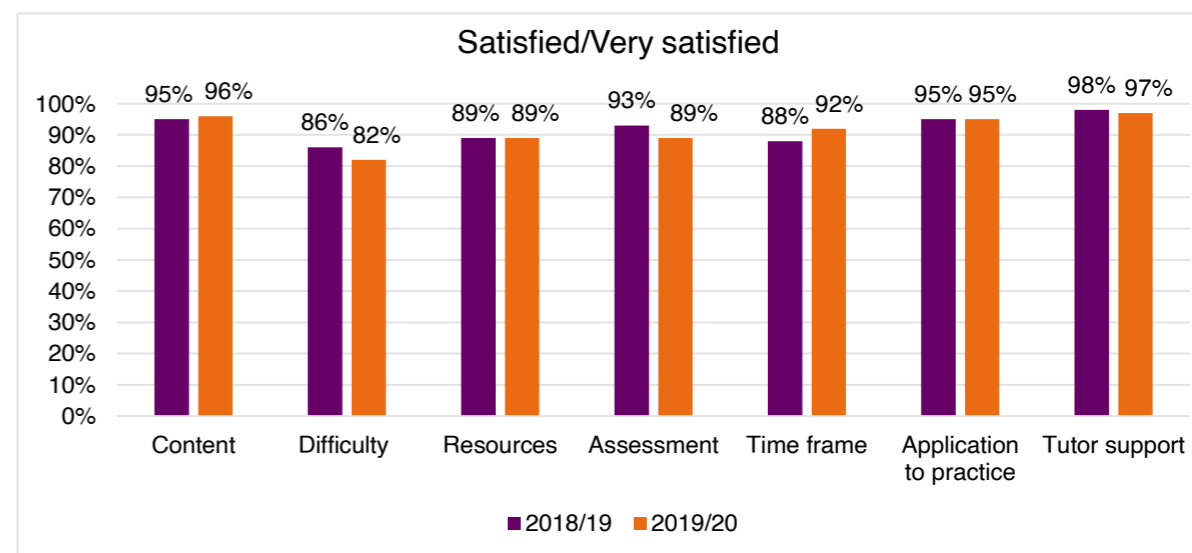


Figure 13. Satisfaction with aspects of LINC Programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Satisfaction with Andragogy-Related Aspects of Programme

Figure 14 illustrates the proportion of participants who rated the andragogy-related aspects of the programme as useful or very useful in 2018/19 and 2019/20. Whilst the weekly tutorials received the lowest ratings from both cohorts, satisfaction was high in all other areas.

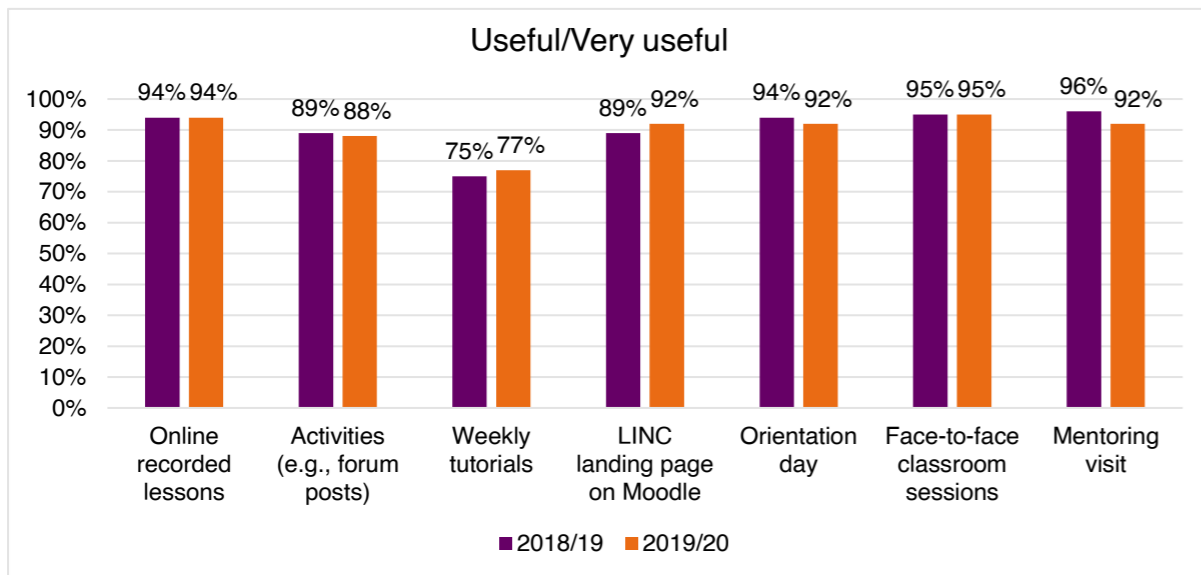


Figure 14. Satisfaction with andragogy-related aspects of LINC 2018/19 and 2019/20

Satisfaction with LINC Supports

Figure 15 demonstrates the proportion of participants who were satisfied or very satisfied with the various LINC supports in 2018/19 and 2019/20. It is important to be aware when interpreting this data that not all participants availed of each support. Although satisfaction was slightly lower with regard to the LINC office and information and communication technology (ICT) support, almost all participants who were not satisfied/very satisfied reported that they felt neutral about these aspects.

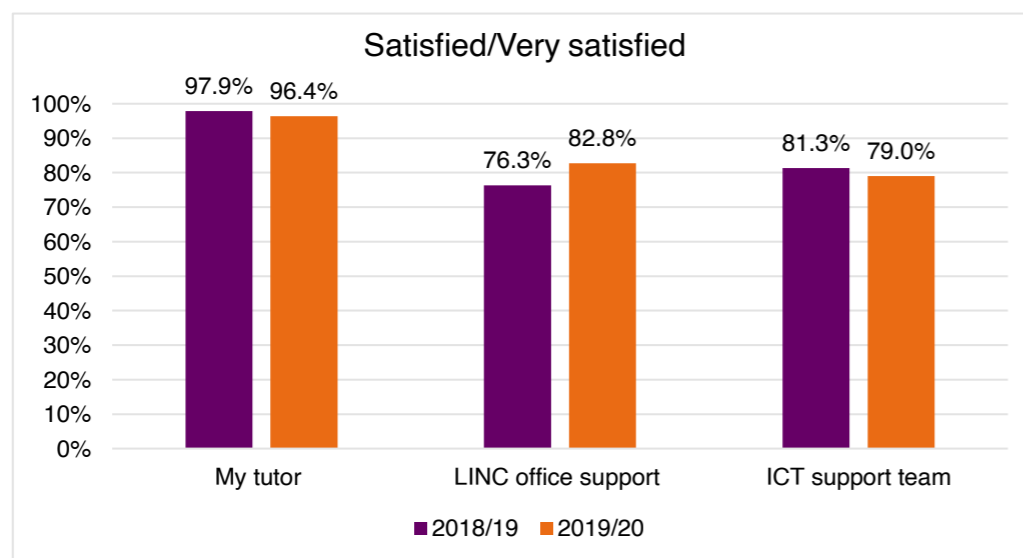


Figure 15. Satisfaction with LINC supports in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Experience of Technology for Learning

Participants were asked to rate retrospectively their competence in using technology for educational purposes prior to the LINC Programme. They were also asked to rate their competence in using technology after completing the programme. Figure 16 illustrates the proportion of participants who rated themselves as competent or very competent in using ICT for learning before and after completing the LINC Programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20. Both cohorts experienced gains in competency in using ICT following participation in the LINC Programme.

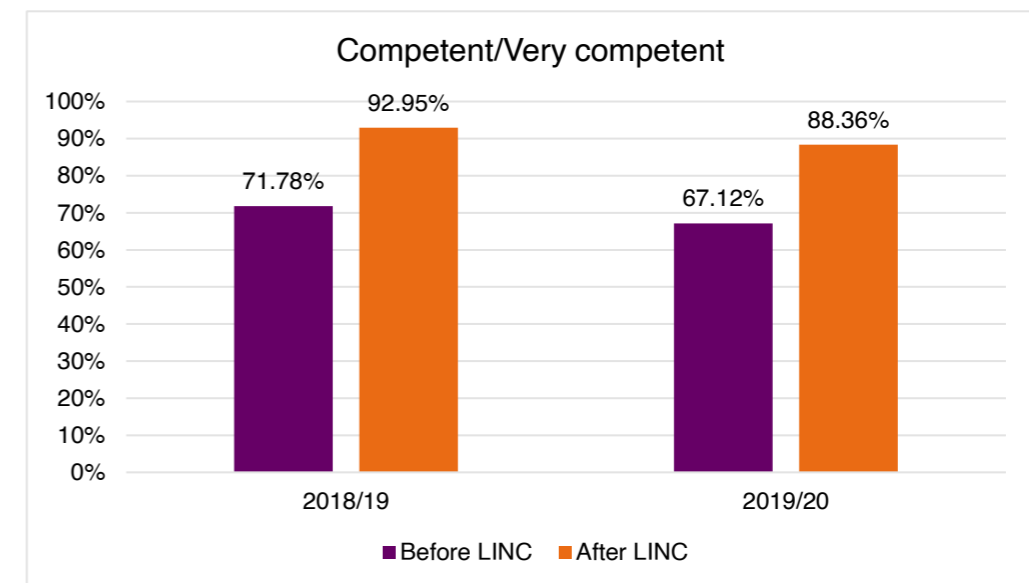


Figure 16. Competency in using ICT before and after LINC Programme

Engagement with Further Education

Participants were asked to indicate whether they intended to do another course following their participation in the LINC Programme. In 2018/19, 56.43% of participants indicated that they planned to progress to another course, with many (44.12%) reporting they planned to pursue an honours degree at Level 7 or 8. In 2019/20, 65.07% of participants indicated that they planned to do another course. Many (37.89%) also reported that they planned to pursue an honours degree at Level 7 or 8.

Additional comments by participants in 2018/19 and 2019/20 provided further evidence of students' satisfaction with LINC and insight into the programme's impact on inclusive practice, teacher motivation and knowledge.

2018/19

'Very practical and informative course, excellent tutor and classes were very interactive and catered for all learning styles.'

'I like the fact that it was an open and sharing forum where people could voice opinions if they wished and share ideas.'

'I am so glad I completed the LINC programme – it has been great for showing me how to put my learning into practice and it has benefited the children, staff and families who attend my service.'

'Opened my mind to a new way of thinking about inclusion & motivated me to share my learning with colleagues.'

2019/20

'I loved this programme. I think the content was fabulous and really well put together and presented on the online lessons which were so easy to manage. The online weekly tutorials were great for clarification and bouncing questions and ideas off other participants.'

'Very happy with the programme. It fits in easily around work.'

'The LINC course gives a foundation from where inclusive practice can be embedded throughout settings which over time will generate a shared ethos across the early years sector.'

'In addition to learning so much about children and their development and inclusion I have learned that my job is probably one of the most important that there is. Helping a child to flourish no matter what needs they have.'

Summary

Participants reported high levels of satisfaction in relation to their experiences of each of the six modules of the LINC Programme across the 2018/19 and 2019/20 periods. Due to Covid-19 restrictions, which came into force in March 2020, the face-to-face sessions for module 5 and module 6 in 2019/20 were pre-recorded and available for participants to access on Moodle. Although satisfaction with the sessions remained high, a decrease from 93%–96% across modules 1–4 who were satisfied/very satisfied to 81%–87% across modules 5–6 was observed. Participants' additional comments indicated that they missed the face-to-face format, particularly the interactions with the tutor and their peers. This highlights the importance of the programme's blended learning approach and the value participants place on opportunities for networking and peer learning.

Exceptionally high levels of satisfaction with the LINC Programme overall were achieved across the 2018/19 and 2019/20 cohorts (97.51% and 95.89% were satisfied/very satisfied, respectively). High levels of satisfaction were also reported in relation to participants' preparedness to lead inclusive culture, practice, and pedagogy in the ELC setting following completion of the LINC Programme, with an increase in satisfaction levels noted from 2018/19 to 2019/20. Participants' satisfaction levels with andragogy-related aspects of the programme were also very high across the 2018/19 and 2019/20 periods. Satisfaction levels with weekly tutorials received the lowest ratings (75%–77% across 2018/2019 and 2019/2020), however, this was a sizeable increase when compared with satisfaction rates for the 2016/17 and 2017/18 academic years, which achieved ratings of 56% and 57%, respectively (see LINC interim evaluation 2019²³).

It is important to interpret the present findings with reference to response rates from participants, particularly with regard to the 2019/20 overall programme evaluation survey. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on many dimensions of people's lives during this period cannot be discounted. Reassuringly, findings were comparable across the 2018/19 and 2019/20 cohorts, indicating the validity of the present data.

²³ LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme*.

CHAPTER 3: BETTER START COHORT SURVEY

Better Start²⁴ is a quality development initiative of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), collaborating with the Early Years Education Policy Unit (EYEPU) of the Department of Education (DoE), which works to establish a cohesive approach to quality and inclusion across the early learning and care (ELC) sector in Ireland. The Better Start Early Years Specialist team work directly in a mentoring capacity with early years services, on a national basis, to enhance quality practice and positive outcomes for children.

The Better Start (Access and Inclusion) Early Years Specialists (EYS) support ELC settings in enabling inclusive practice and children's participation under the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM). A number of Better Start Early Years Specialists (Access and Inclusion) have participated in the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme as part of their ongoing continuing professional development (CPD).

In the 2017/18 academic year, 54 Better Start EYS were invited to take part in a survey evaluation of their experience of the LINC Programme. The response rate was 37%, or 20 participants in total. This response rate is comparable to the average response rates achieved across the module evaluation surveys distributed to the main LINC Programme cohort in 2018/19 and 2019/20 (38% and 31%, respectively). The evaluation survey comprised both Likert scale and open-ended questions. The survey was sent via email to the Better Start LINC Programme participants, opening for responses on 20/06/2018 and closing on 20/07/2018.



²⁴ <https://www.betterstart.ie/>

Overall Satisfaction with Programme

Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with the LINC Programme on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). 85% ($n = 17$) of participants indicated that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the LINC Programme overall. Responses are illustrated in Figure 17.

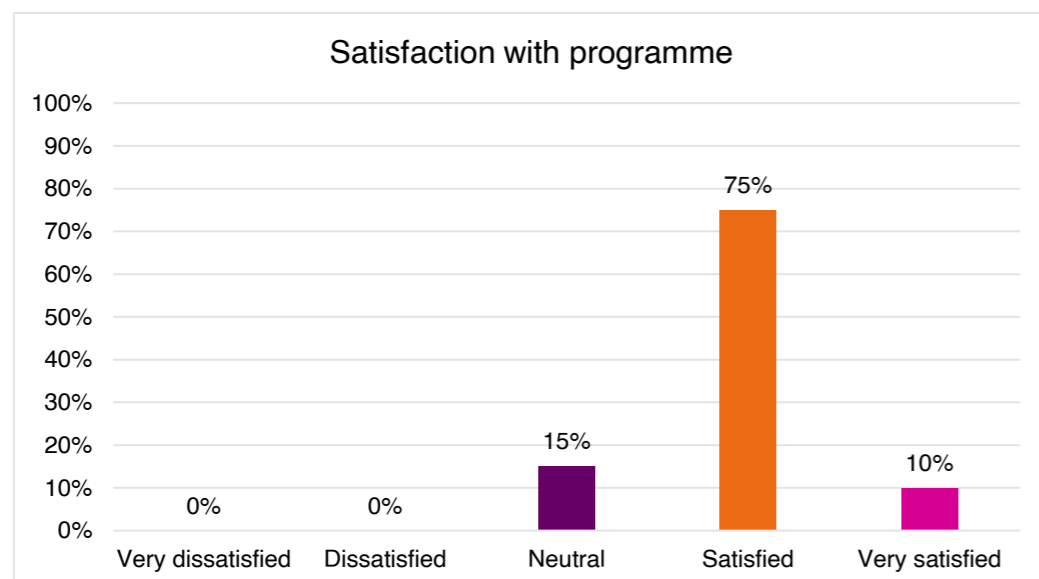


Figure 17. Better Start cohort’s satisfaction with LINC Programme ($n = 20$)

Participants were asked to expand on their answers in the additional comments. A few participants broadly praised the quality of the programme’s content, stating that it was good (2), up to date (1), informative (1), and interesting (1). One participant plainly stated that they enjoyed the programme. In contrast, a few participants felt that the content was repetitive (3) while others felt they had not gained new learning as they had covered similar content in previous courses (2). A few participants thought that the programme was not adjusted to meet the needs of EYS (3), while a few others felt that the knowledge the INclusion CO-ordinators (INCOs) had covered was of benefit (2).

I feel a lot of the content reiterated knowledge that I already had from previous studies and experience. I do believe, however, that by engaging in the programme provided me with insight into the knowledge practitioners were being provided with.

One participant felt that there should be no exemptions for participants from the Child Development and Curriculum for Inclusion modules due to the valuable nature of the content. The same participant thought that the course should have a wider focus and include all children, not just those with additional needs.

I really enjoyed the programme. I feel that the EYS should not be exempt from the child development and curriculum modules as the content is so important. I feel that the course needs to look at inclusion in general and not just in relation to children with additional needs. AIM is a needs’ focused programme and not diagnosis led. A number of children who require support from AIM do not have a disability and their needs are stemming from environmental factors.

One participant felt that although the programme was enjoyable, it was difficult to balance with other commitments. Another participant felt that there was too much expected for a Level 6 qualification, but also that assignments were not tailored towards those with higher qualifications who would be taking ‘a step back’ in this regard.

When asked to describe, in one sentence, what they took from the LINC Programme, some participants stated in broad terms that they had gained new knowledge, or had refreshed/updated existing knowledge (4). One participant stated that they had gained more knowledge specifically in the area of collaborative practice, whilst another felt the learning from the Leadership for Inclusion module supported them in their role as a mentor to services. A few participants stated that they gained a sense that inclusion was changing and being addressed effectively in Ireland (3). Finally, one participant stated that the programme had allowed them to get back into a frame of mind for further study.

Understanding the Role of the INclusion CO-ordinator

Almost all participants reported that engaging in the LINC Programme supported their understanding of the role of the INCO (see Figure 18). Note that one respondent selected two options in response to this question (yes and unsure).

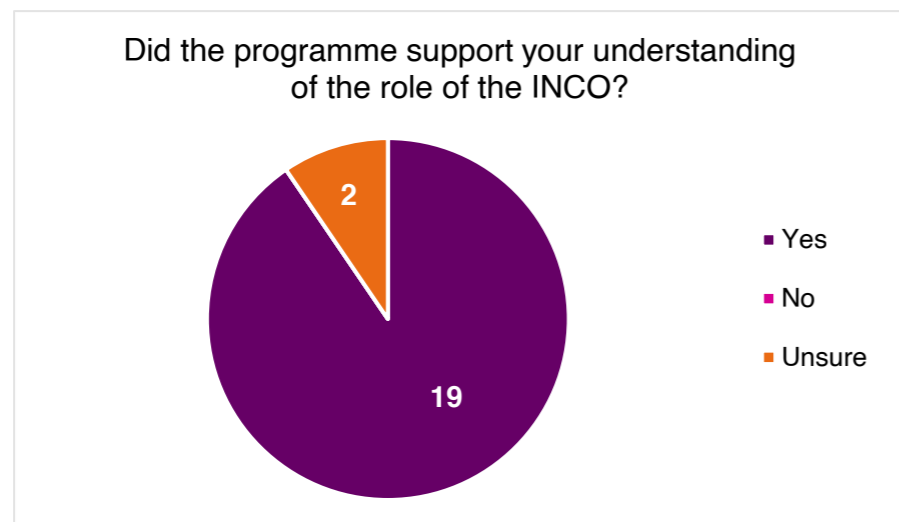


Figure 18. Better Start cohort’s understanding of INCO role

In the additional comments, one participant reflected on their experience as a Better Start EYS, expressing that now that they understood the role of the INCO more fully, they could see that services were not always utilising INCOs appropriately.

Preparation for Leadership in Inclusion

Participants were asked how well they felt the programme prepared them to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency: inclusive culture; inclusive practice; and inclusive pedagogy. Responses are illustrated in Figure 19 below. Almost all participants felt that the programme prepared them well or very well to lead inclusive culture (95%). Most participants thought that the programme prepared them well or very well to lead inclusive practice (85%) and inclusive pedagogy (85%).

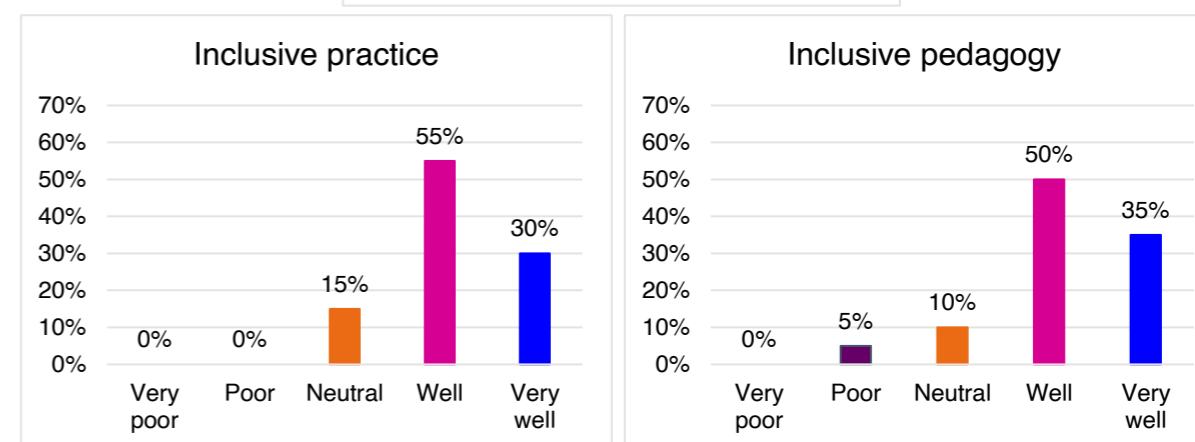
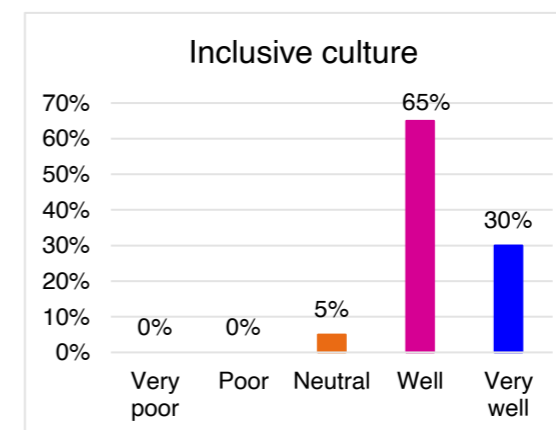


Figure 19. How well LINC prepared participants to lead in inclusion

Whilst some participants felt that this learning outcome was somewhat irrelevant to the Better Start EYS role (2), a few others thought that the programme covered this aspect very well for practitioners (1) and that it would support early childhood teachers in their work (1). A few participants put forward suggestions as to how the programme could be improved in this regard. One participant suggested including more strategies and resources. Another participant suggested incorporating further mentoring visits into the programme in order to facilitate the application of learning to practice.

From my experience of engaging with INCOs who have completed the training I do feel they need a more ‘hands-on’ approach to learning. I am aware that the practitioners receive one on-site visit, however more hands-on visits related to the content you are delivering, such as modelling the use of a visual aid or a task analysis specifically related to a practitioner’s pre-school room.

One participant suggested that all staff in early years settings should have access to a short online introductory course on inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy and the role of the INCO, in order to be able to support the INCO and value their role:

I feel all staff in a setting should have to complete a short online session on inclusive culture, inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy and the role of the INCO. This would ensure that they are aware of the INCO's role and support them to value the work of the INCO.

Satisfaction with Aspects of the Programme

Participants were next asked to indicate their levels of satisfaction with various aspects of the programme (see Figure 20). Similar to findings arising from the main LINC Programme cohorts described in Chapter 2, participants demonstrated the highest levels of satisfaction with the tutor support on the programme (95% were satisfied/very satisfied) and lower satisfaction with the programme difficulty (60% were satisfied/very satisfied). However, dissatisfaction levels remain notably low, with only 5% reporting dissatisfaction with assessment and 10% with the programme time frame. See Appendix E, Table 21 for a precise breakdown of participant responses.

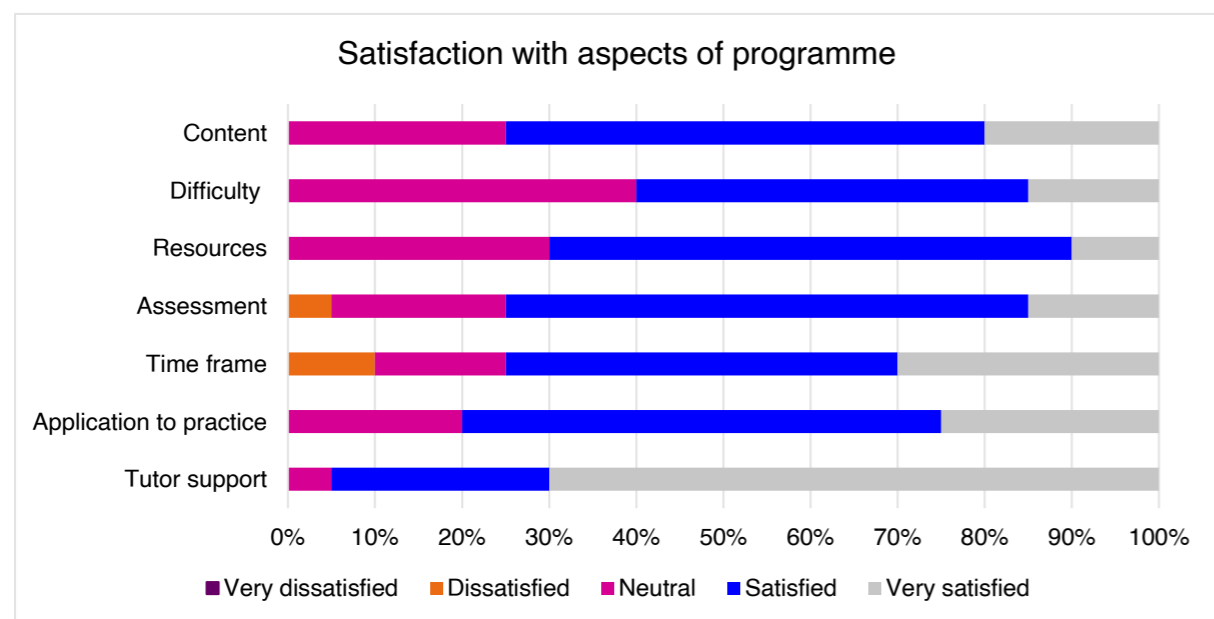


Figure 20. Participant satisfaction with aspects of LINC Programme

Satisfaction with Andragogy-Related Aspects of Programme

Participants were asked to rate their levels of satisfaction with various andragogy-related aspects of the programme as summarised in Figure 21 below. They expressed the highest level of satisfaction with the online recorded lessons, orientation day and face-to-face classes (85% found these aspects useful/very useful) and lower satisfaction with the weekly tutorials (35% found these aspects useful/very useful). See Appendix E, Table 22 for further detail of participant responses.

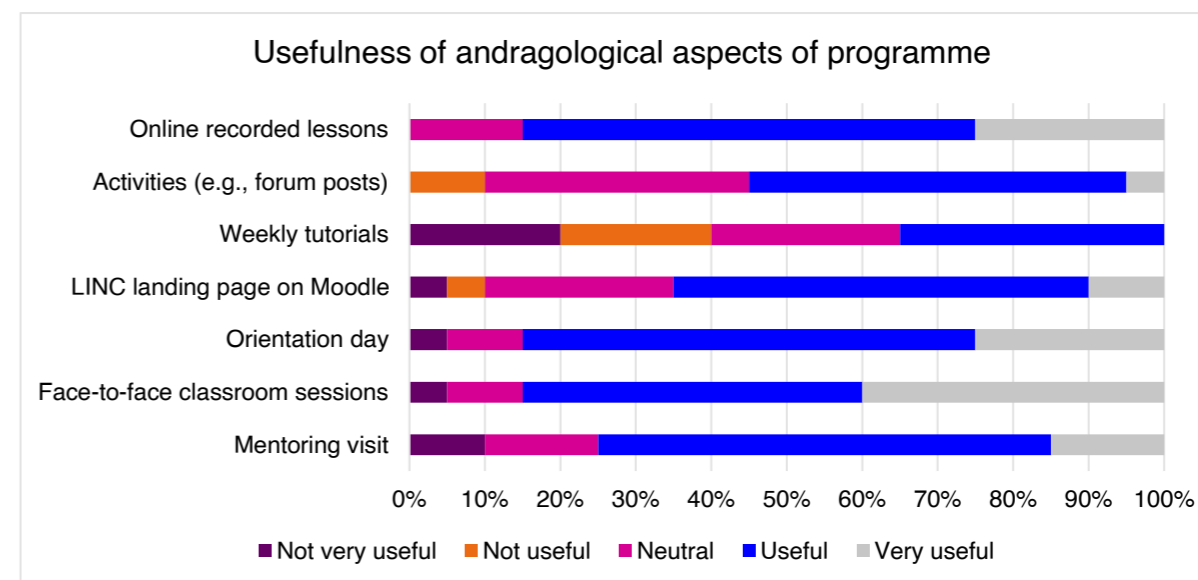


Figure 21. Satisfaction with andragogy-related aspects of LINC Programme

Similar to findings from the 2018/19 and 2019/20 student cohorts discussed in Chapter 2, the weekly tutorials received the lowest rating. It should be emphasised that the Better Start participants completed the programme alongside the 2017/18 student cohort and that there was a sizeable increase in satisfaction with the weekly tutorials from this academic year to the next among the general student population (see Interim Evaluation of the LINC Programme²⁵).

Drawing on these data, the format and structure of the weekly tutorials were redeveloped. Initially, each tutor engaged in a text-based tutorial session by means of a check-in with their respective student cohort. Following student feedback and

²⁵ LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme*.

recommendations from external examiners (see Chapter 5), tutorials were redesigned to comprise a more structured topic-based approach across all student cohorts during these sessions. Weekly tutorials were restructured to consolidate and support students' learning from the online pre-recorded lessons and to support students with assignments and referencing. Please note that the weekly tutorials were delivered in a text-based format until the LINC Programme moved to the BigBlueButton²⁶ platform.

Positive Aspects of LINC

Participants were asked to list three positive aspects of the LINC Programme. Many participants described the tutor support as excellent (8), a few commended the programme's content (3) its application to practice (2) and mentioned that they had gained new knowledge as a result of their participation (3). Further, a few participants stated that they now had a better understanding of the role of the INCO as well as the content INCOs had covered (3). A few participants commended the reflective practice element of the programme (4). The two comments quoted below summarise participants' views:

I really enjoyed the leadership module as engaging in this content supported me in my role as a mentor to services and their staff.

Excellent tutor. Her face to faces were very informative and interesting.

Many of the participants stated that they liked the blended learning format as it was manageable and convenient to complete (7). A few mentioned that Moodle was easy to navigate (3). One participant stated that the Portfolio module was a positive aspect of the programme, whilst another commented that they enjoyed the Leadership for Inclusion module.

Some participants stated that the face-to-face sessions were beneficial (4), while others commented that they found the opportunity for networking and/or peer learning a positive aspect of the programme (4). In a similar vein, one participant mentioned that they appreciated the time allotted to group discussions during these sessions.

²⁶ See <http://bigbluebutton.org/>

A few participants stated that they were satisfied with the time frame of the programme (3), with one participant mentioning that it was flexible, and a second one stating that they appreciated having autonomy over when to do the lessons.

A few participants commented that they found access to materials and resources beneficial (2). Others stated that they enjoyed the videos and found them useful (3). Finally, one participant simply affirmed the opportunity to engage in continuing professional development (CPD).

Recommendations to Change Aspects of LINC

Participants were also asked to list three things that they would change about the LINC Programme. A few participants suggested that that repetition across the course could be reduced (3). One participant also felt that the content could be adjusted for the EYS audience. Another stated that they thought some of the content was vague but did not expand further. A few participants highlighted areas that they would like to see elaborated or added to the programme. These suggestions included more practical strategies (2) as well as widening the focus to include all children, not just those with additional needs (1). One participant stated that they would like a library list/list of resources for ease of locating resources. Another mentioned that they would like to have access to all online content at once, rather than waiting for content to be released.

One participant suggested that the programme should have a shorter time frame. Another stated that they would like more face-to-face sessions, whilst two participants felt there should be less forum post activities. Many commented negatively on the usefulness of the weekly tutorials (10), suggesting they could be either less frequent (3), removed from the programme altogether (3), or reconsidered (2). One participant felt that assignment briefs could be clearer. Another queried the value of the special purpose award in relation to pursuing further study, but did not expand on this. Yet another participant thought that the programme should lead to a level 7 or 8 programme.

A few participants offered suggestions as to how the LINC Programme could be adapted for the main cohort (i.e. those training to become INCOs). For example, one participant suggested allowing more than one member of staff per service to complete the programme, whilst another suggested that students on the main programme should receive more mentoring visits.

Summary

Most (85%) Better Start participants reported that they were satisfied/very satisfied with the LINC Programme overall. This figure is slightly lower than the level of satisfaction reported by the main LINC Programme participant cohort that same year (93%; see LINC interim evaluation²⁷). It is important to emphasise, however, that the LINC Programme was tailor-made for early years teachers working in ELC settings in order to fulfil the role of INCO. On the other hand, Better Start EYS, who support and mentor early childhood teachers within their ELC settings, including engaging with and supporting INCOs, engaged with the LINC Programme as a form of CPD and to gain an understanding of the role of INCO. According to the present findings, almost all Better Start participants responded that engaging in the LINC Programme supported their understanding of the INCO role.

Better Start participants reported moderate to very high levels of satisfaction in relation to the programme content, difficulty, resources, assessment, time frame, application to practice and tutor support. Similar to the main LINC Programme cohorts, Better Start participants demonstrated lower satisfaction with the weekly tutorials compared to other andragogy-related aspects of the programme.

The Better Start participants commended several aspects of the programme such as content, time frame, tutor support, the blended learning format and opportunities for networking. Participants also made a number of recommendations such as reconsidering the format of the weekly tutorials, reducing repetition across programme content and working more with settings to ensure INCOs are supported in their role.

²⁷ LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme*.

Reflecting the evolving nature of the concept of inclusion, an observation was made that the programme should 'look at inclusion in general and not just in relation to children with additional needs.' This observation has also been raised on an annual basis by the external examiners for the LINC Programme. While as pointed out by this participant, the AIM is 'a needs' focused programme and not diagnosis-led', the model is associated with, and stems from the report on *Supporting Access to the Early Childhood Care and Education Programme for Children with a Disability*.²⁸ The request for tender (RfT) for the LINC Programme responded to by the LINC Consortium in 2016 reflected this alignment, hence the Consortium's obligation to adhere to the terms of the RfT in this regard.



²⁸ Inter-Departmental Group (2015) *Supporting access to the early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme for children with a disability*, Dublin: Inter-Departmental Group, available at: <https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/Inter-Departmental-Group-Report-launched-Nov-2015.pdf>

CHAPTER 4: EMPLOYERS' SURVEYS

The employers of participants on the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme were contacted via email and invited to participate in an anonymous online survey relating to their early learning and care (ELC) setting's experience of the LINC Programme. This email explained the survey's purpose, emphasised the voluntary and confidential nature of participation and provided contact details for LINC Programme personnel and for the MIREC. The employers' survey comprised Likert scale and open-ended questions. A copy of the questionnaire is included in Appendix F.

The 2018/19 survey opened for responses on 04/09/2019 and closed on 29/10/2019. The 2019/20 survey opened for responses on 29/06/2020 and closed on 30/07/2020. Response rates to the employers' surveys in 2018/19 and 2019/20 are provided in Table 9 below. Please note that in both 2018/19 and 2019/20, a number of employers did not answer every question in the survey. The lower response rate for the 2019/20 cohort may be attributed to the time of year in which the survey was opened to participants as many ELC settings close for the summer. In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is a factor to consider during this period.

Table 9. Employers' survey response rates in 2018/19 and 2019/20

	Invited	Completed	Proportion completed
2018/19	880	216–220	25%
2019/20	883	105–108	12%

Profile of Staff Engaging in LINC Programme

Employers were asked to indicate the role of the staff member in their setting who had participated in the LINC Programme. As indicated in Figure 22, the majority of those who undertook the programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20 were employers (55.09% and 54.71%, respectively). The responses also indicated that the majority of those who undertook the programme both years were the respondents themselves (54.17% and 51.88%, respectively).

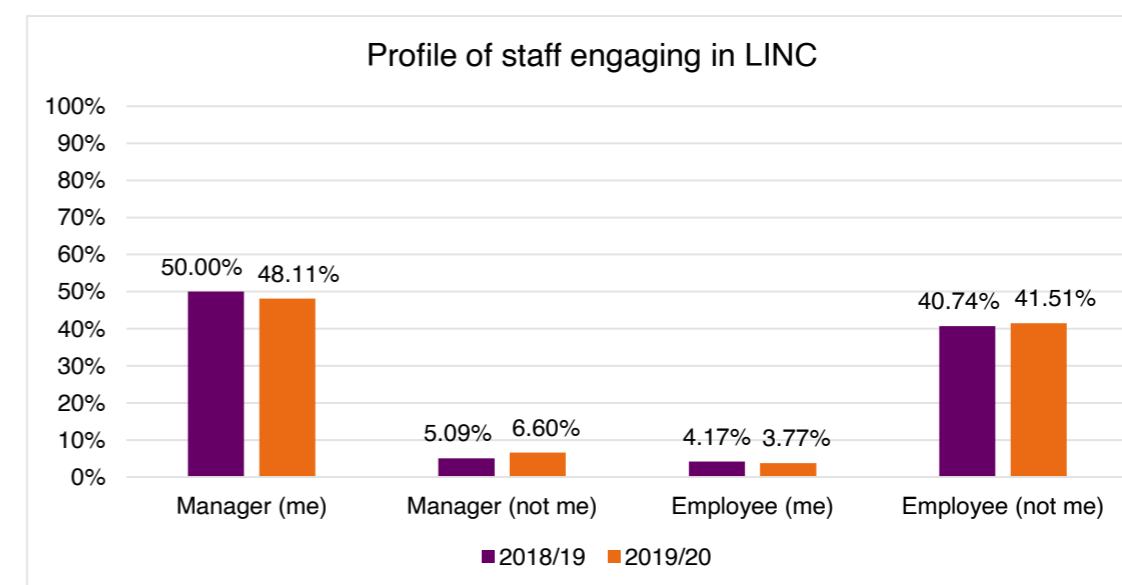


Figure 22. Profile of staff engaging in LINC Programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Employers' Satisfaction with LINC Programme

Survey respondents were asked to rate their level of satisfaction with the LINC Programme from an employer's perspective. As indicated in Figure 23, most employers (86.82%; $n = 191$) were satisfied or very satisfied with the programme in 2018/19. Almost all employers (90.74%; $n = 98$) reported that they were satisfied or very satisfied with the programme in 2019/20. It is important to note that several discrepancies were noted between the ratings provided and employers' additional comments which suggested that employers' satisfaction with the LINC Programme both years may be slightly underestimated by the present quantitative data. There were no significant differences in the satisfaction levels of respondents who had completed the programme themselves (Manager me/Employee me) and respondents

who had an employee complete the programme (Manager not me /Employee not me) in 2018/19 or 2019/20, as indicated by one-way analyses of variance.

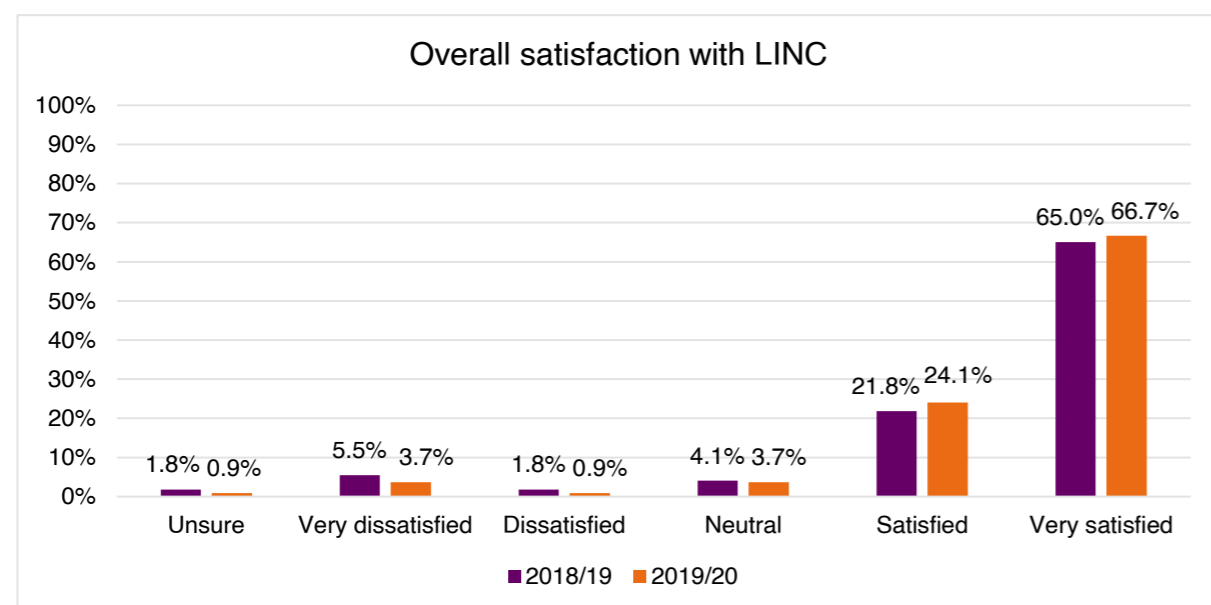


Figure 23. Employers' satisfaction with LINC Programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Availability of Information to Employers

As evidenced in Figure 24 below, there was a slight decrease from 2018/19 to 2019/20 in the proportion of employers who felt they had received sufficient information about the LINC Programme (94.52% and 89.81%, respectively).

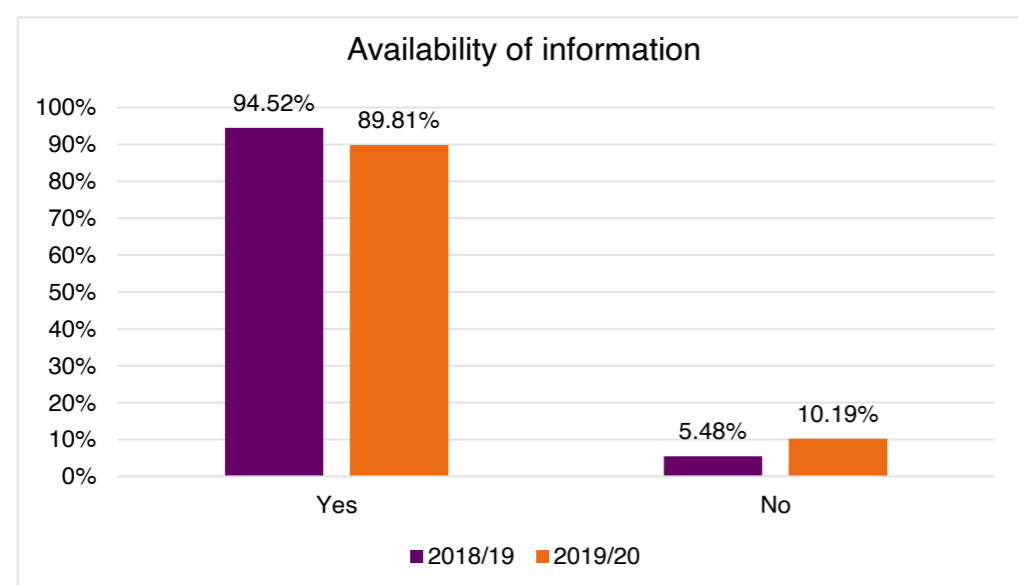


Figure 24. Employers' satisfaction with availability of information

In 2019/20, employers commented that they would have liked more information regarding their employee's level of engagement with the programme (1), their employee's progress (1) and the expectations for the graduate in the setting (2). Employers also would have liked prior information regarding the programme's workload (3), more information regarding the programme's content (4) and more information on 'everything' generally (1).

Benefit to the Early Learning and Care Setting

90% of employers reported that they felt their ELC setting benefited well or very well from participating in the LINC Programme in 2018/19 compared to 87% in 2019/20. Findings are summarised below in Figure 25.

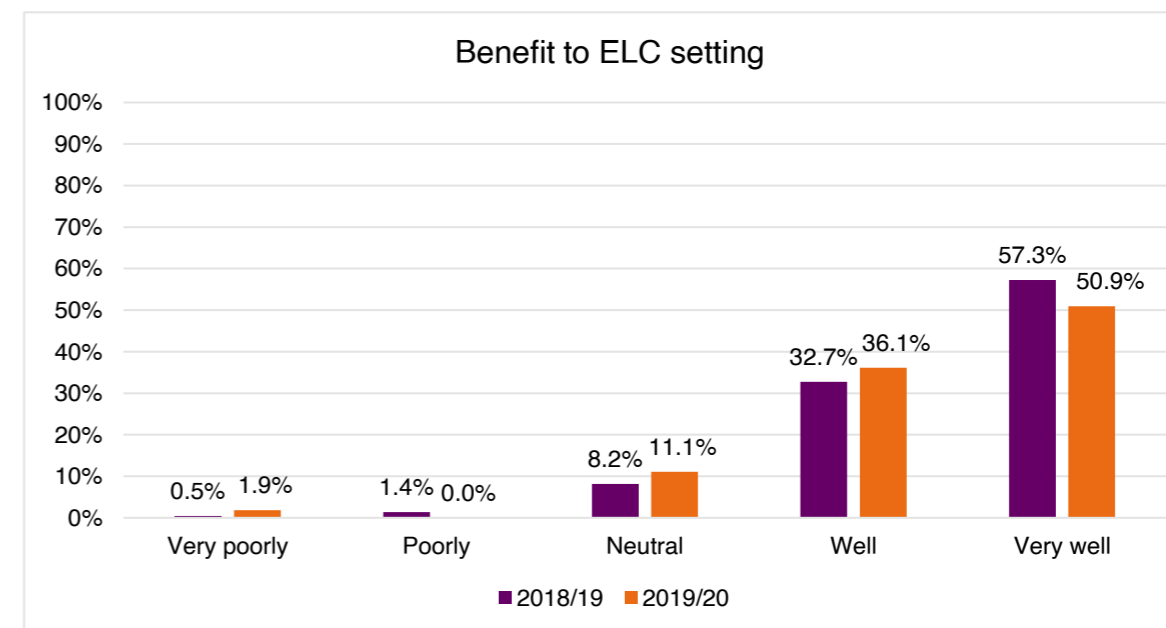


Figure 25. Perceived benefit to ELC setting in 2018/19 and 2019/20

A few (5) employers of the 2019/20 cohort commented that at the time of completing the evaluation survey, the setting was closed for the summer holidays/due to COVID-19 closures, and that any benefit to the setting would likely be made more apparent upon reopening the following September.

Graduates' Preparedness for Leadership in Inclusion

Almost all employers felt that the LINC Programme prepared the graduate well or very well to lead in the three key LINC Programme areas of competency – inclusive culture; inclusive practice; and inclusive pedagogy – in the setting in 2018/19 and 2019/20 (see Figure 26).

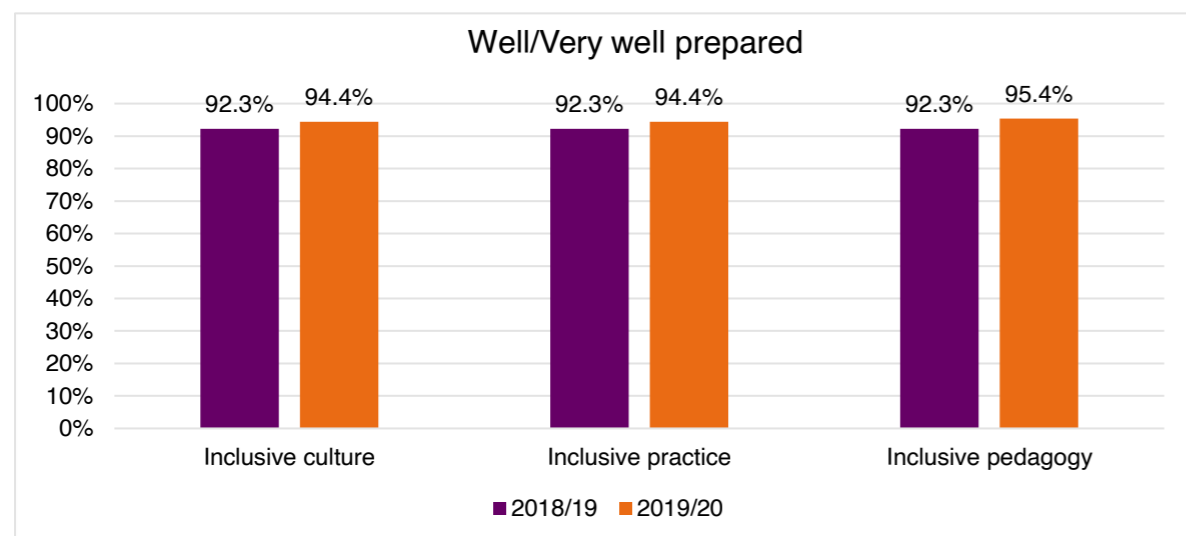


Figure 26. Employers' perspectives on graduates' preparedness to lead in inclusion

Shared Learning

In 2018/19, 90.5% of employers felt that the learning from the LINC Programme was being shared well/very well in the ELC setting, compared to 87% in 2019/20 (see Figure 27).

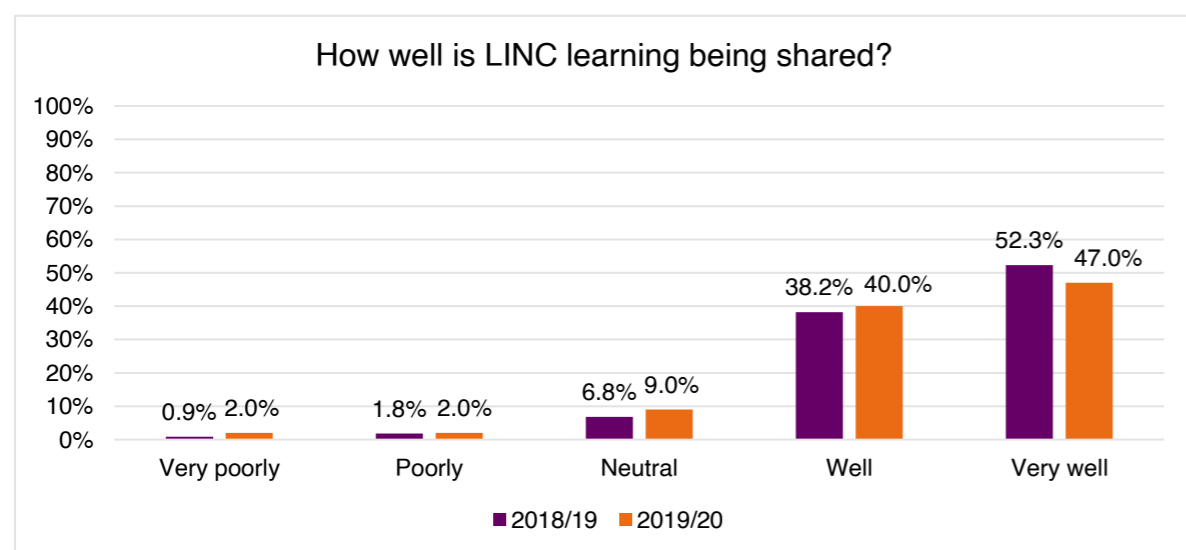


Figure 27. How well learning is being shared in ELC setting in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Next Steps for Employers

Employers were asked to indicate whether they intended to appoint the LINC graduate as INclusion CO-ordinator (INCO) in their setting. As indicated in Figure 28, almost all employers intended to appoint the graduate as INCO in 2018/19. In 2019/20, most employers reported that they intended to appoint the graduate as INCO.

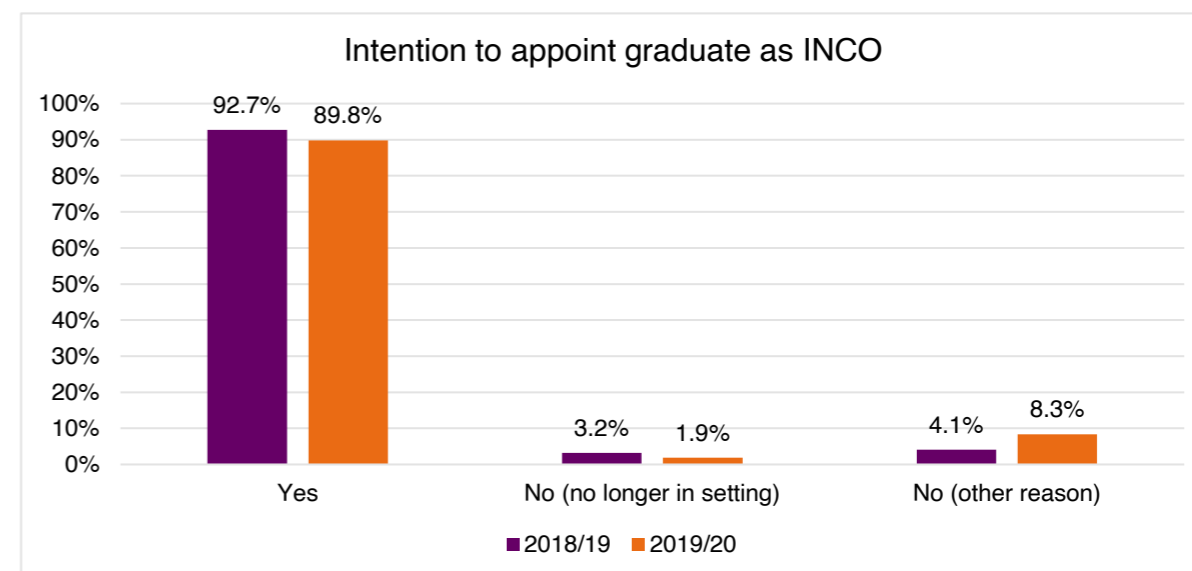


Figure 28. Employers' intention to appoint graduate as INCO in 2018/19 and 2019/20

Reasons articulated for not appointing the graduate as INCO were mainly due to the setting already having a designated INCO (according to 2 employers in 2018/19 and 4 in 2019/20) and that the respondent/manager themselves had completed the programme (4 in 2018/19 and 1 in 2019/20). Other reasons cited in 2019/20 included the closure of the setting (2), the graduate being on maternity leave (1) and being unaware of the role/expectation for the LINC graduate in the setting (1).

The appointment of an INCO comes with additional capitation. Employers were asked to select from a range of options pertaining to what the capitation may be used for, with the opportunity to select multiple options if relevant, or 'other' if their intended purpose was not listed. As detailed in Figure 29, the majority of employers indicated that they intended to use the additional capitation to increase the INCO's salary (52% in 2018/19 and 54% in 2019/20) and the purchase of new resources, materials and equipment (56% in 2018/19 and 61% in 2019/20).

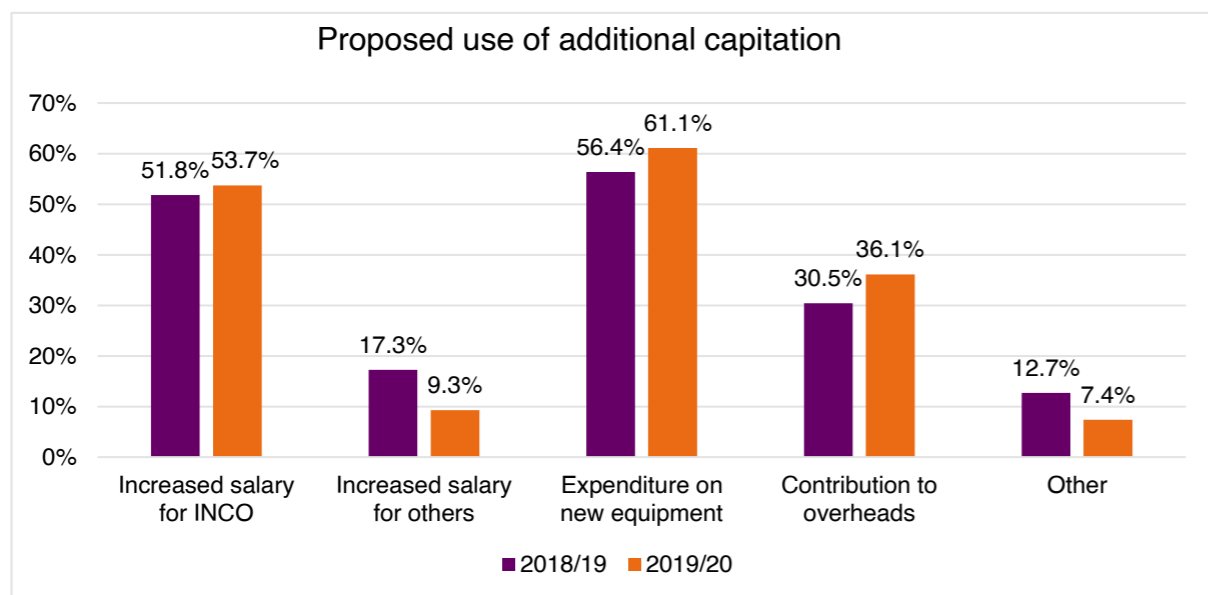


Figure 29. Proposed use of additional capitation in 2018/19 and 2019/20

In 2018/19 'other' intended uses of the additional capitation included further training and CPD for staff (3), increasing the INCO's hours (2) and funding for a support teacher for a child with additional needs at Level 7 (1). Employers in 2019/20 did not elaborate on the 'other' intended uses of the additional capitation.

Summary

Employers' responses indicated that to date, managers themselves comprise the majority of those who have successfully undertaken the LINC Programme. Whilst managers are well-positioned to ensure the application of the role of INCO in the ELC setting, increasing participation of early childhood teachers who are not in a managerial position would potentially contribute to the realisation of the core LINC values of distributed leadership and professionalisation of the ELC sector.

Survey respondents indicated high overall levels of satisfaction with the programme in their capacity as employer. Employers' satisfaction with the LINC Programme increased from 86.82% of employers who were satisfied or very satisfied with the programme in 2018/19 to 90.74% in 2019/20. Almost all employers in both 2018/19 and 2019/20 felt that the LINC Programme prepared the graduate well or very well to lead in inclusive culture, inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy in the setting. The

proportion of employers' who felt their ELC setting benefited well or very well from participating in the LINC Programme was high in both years (90% in 2018/19 and 87% in 2019/20).

Overall, employers indicated that they were also satisfied regarding the availability of information in relation to the programme. In 2018/19, 94.52% felt that they were given sufficient information about the LINC Programme, compared to 89.81% in 2019/20. 2018/19 saw the introduction of an employer's newsletter which is now issued for each module to keep employers updated and informed. Since 2021/22, the LINC Programme recruitment strategy has also included online information sessions for managers with the LINC Programme National Coordinator to ensure employers are equipped with sufficient information about the programme and the role of the INCO and have the opportunity to ask any questions they might have.

A high proportion of employers reported that they intended to appoint the LINC graduate as INCO in the setting (92.73% in 2018/19 compared to 89.81% in 2019/20). Reasons for not appointing the graduate as INCO included the setting already having an INCO, the graduate being on maternity leave and the graduate having left the setting.

The present findings must be considered in light of low response rates from employers, particularly with regard to the 2019/20 survey, which is understandable, given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the period when the survey was released. Future research is also required to ascertain the retention rates of INCOs nationally.

CHAPTER 5: QUALITY ASSURANCE

In the context of the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme Consortium Steering Group's commitment to the development and implementation of a high-quality programme, a number of internal and external quality assurance mechanisms were established from the outset of the programme. The quality assurance process in 2018/19 comprised two internal mechanisms (academic standardisation and quality control visits) and one external mechanism (external examiners' review). The processes of academic standardisation and external examiners' review were also adhered to in 2019/20; however, quality control visits were not conducted during this academic year. These visits had been scheduled to take place during the face-to-face session for 'module 5: Leadership for Inclusion' but due to Covid-19 restrictions, which came into force in March 2020, these sessions were moved online. As a result, no quality control visits were conducted during that period.

Academic Standardisation

A number of processes were implemented in 2018/19 and 2019/20 in order to ensure consistency in the delivery and assessment of the LINC Programme across the various LINC centres. Specific measures included periodic online and face-to-face meetings among the LINC team to ensure a consistent approach across the face-to-face module content, weekly tutorials, management of student queries and discussions as well as mentoring visits. During weekly online team meetings, the National Programme Coordinator and LINC tutor team (along with additional faculty members, where appropriate) updated one another on developments, shared queries and agreed strategies to emerging issues. The online lessons taken by all students on the programme were developed and pre-recorded by members of staff from the three LINC Consortium members, ensuring standardisation across LINC centres along with consistency of student experience.

In order to ensure a standardised approach to grading and assessment, a detailed grading rubric for each module was agreed upon by the LINC tutors. This, alongside

a process of cross-moderation of each module assignment where all tutors marked sample assignments for each module, enabled the tutor team to agree a common approach and understanding of how students are expected to meet the assessment requirements. The processes established by the LINC team to ensure academic standardisation were commended in the external examiners' reviews in 2018/19 and 2019/20 (see Appendix G).

Quality Control Visits

In order to ensure high-quality programme delivery and consistency across all LINC centres, the LINC Consortium Steering Group instigated a series of annual quality control visits. These visits took place during face-to-face sessions and were conducted by experienced members of staff from the three LINC Consortium members. The quality control visits for the 2018/19 cohort took place in nine programme centres (see Appendix E, Table 23 for locations and venues) during the face-to-face session for 'module 6: Portfolio module' on the 08/06/2019 (5 visits) and 15/06/2019 (4 visits). The duration of these visits ranged between ninety minutes and two hours.

A criterion-based process was developed for the quality control visits comprising measurement and weighting criteria focused on the quality of programme content and delivery; quality of participant engagement; and quality of the venue. Each quality controller completed a quality assurance document encompassing these three areas during and after the visit to each programme centre. Each of these areas of quality comprised a number of criteria (see Tables 11–13).

The quality assurance document contained specific measurement and weighting criteria (see Table 10) in order to assess the three key areas of quality in a consistent manner. The document also included a section for additional comments where LINC quality controllers could provide further detail. These comments were analysed using NVivo software.²⁹

²⁹ QSR International (2018) *NVivo 12 Pro*, Melbourne: QSR International.

Table 10. Measurement and weighting criteria for quality assurance visits

1	2	3	4	5
Never/Almost never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always/Almost always
Unacceptable	Acceptable	Good	Very good	Excellent

Quality of Programme Content and Delivery

Table 11 presents the average score across the nine venues for each criterion comprising the content and delivery aspect of the quality assurance document in the academic year 2018/19.

Table 11. Quality of programme content and delivery 2018/19

Criteria	Mean score
1 The content is clear and easily understood	4.9
2 Material is presented in a stimulating and engaging manner utilising a range of teaching methods	4.8
3 There is a good balance between tutor-led and student-led activities	4.7
4 Links are consistently made between theory and its practical application to leading inclusion in the early years	4.8
5 Sufficient time is allowed for students to absorb and discuss content	4.8
6 Resources are adequate to support learning and teaching	4.9

Comments relevant to programme content and delivery are summarised below (please note that individual quality controllers may have commented on more than one aspect of programme content and delivery).

Quality controllers commented positively on the clarity of programme content and presentation (9), reporting that tutors made links between theory and practice (3) and indicating that there was an appropriate balance between tutor- and student-led activities (2). Quality controllers also commented that the content was delivered in an engaging manner (4); that there was good group-management (6); that the tutor and assistant tutor worked well together (5); that tutors engaged professionally (5); that a mix of teaching methods was observed (1); and that the session was well-paced (3).

Some points for consideration were also noted. One controller queried whether the assistant tutor could have been given a more prominent role whilst another suggested more time be allotted for reflection on video-clips.

Quality of Participant Engagement

Table 12 presents the average score across the nine venues for each criterion comprising the participant engagement aspect of the quality assurance document in 2018/19.

Table 12. Quality of participant engagement 2018/19

Criteria	Mean score
1 Participants arrive punctually for all sessions	4.5
2 There is evidence that participants have a clear understanding of the content being delivered	4.6
3 Participants engage enthusiastically with discussion topics	4.6
4 Participants are confident in asking questions and seeking clarification where necessary and feedback is provided appropriately	4.4

Quality controllers' comments on the quality of participant engagement were largely positive. These comments referred to respectful and supportive interactions with students (8) and that students were engaged in and/or enthusiastic about the session (8). Controllers also commented that they observed evidence of students'

understanding of the content and that they had a sense that learning and reflection were taking place (5).

Some points for consideration were also noted. One controller suggested that there could have been more interaction before the small group exercise. Another thought that some of the small group discussions could have been captured at the whole-group level.

Quality of Venue

Table 13 presents the average score across the nine venues for each criterion comprising the venue component of the quality assurance document in 2018/19.

Table 13. *Quality of venue 2018/19*

Criteria	Mean score
1 A bright, spacious and safe environment is provided	4.2
2 The environment is appropriately heated and ventilated	4.3
3 Furniture and equipment are of a good standard	4.7
4 There are good ICT facilities available	4.4
5 Access to the internet is readily available	4.7
6 Parking facilities are adequate	4.7
7 Catering facilities are provided	4.6
8 Toilet facilities are clean, hygienic and readily accessible	4.9

Overall, the venues achieved ratings of very good/often for each criterion. Comments were made on five venues. One controller described the venue as 'excellent'. However, some issues were noted. One controller noted that the lighting and acoustics in the room were poor. Another suggested that the layout of the room was not conducive to small-group work.

Management of Quality Control Visit Data

Insights from the quality control visits are discussed during periodic review meetings and an annual end-of-year review meeting which take place among the LINC team, including the National Coordinator and tutor team. At these meetings, data from the quality review are discussed and amendments to the programme decided upon. For example, the assistant tutor role was extended to include delivery of a portion of the face-to-face class material. Furthermore, session plans have since been implemented for the Saturday classes which outline the amount of time to be allocated to the various elements of the class, for example group discussions. Before moving fully online in March 2020, venues for the face-to-face classes changed annually according to the geographical distribution of programme participants each year and based on feedback from students and quality control reviews.

External Examination

Further to internal quality control visits, annual reviews of the LINC Programme by external examiners ensure the continued delivery of a high-quality programme to learners. On commencement of the LINC Programme, two external examiners – Professor Seamus Hegarty, University of Warwick and Professor Orla Doyle, University College Dublin – were appointed. The processes by which external examiners conduct their annual review of the programme are detailed in the *Interim Evaluation of the LINC Programme*.³⁰ The external examiners' meeting took place face-to-face in 2018/19 and was conducted via Microsoft Teams³¹ in 2019/20. The external examiners both submitted a written report with a range of commendations and recommendations following each annual visit. A summary of the commendations and recommendations contained in the four reports (one from each external examiner in 2018/19 and 2019/20) is outlined in Appendix G. In the interests of preserving transparency, this summary was approved by both external examiners prior to the publication of this report.

³⁰ LINC Consortium (2019) *Interim evaluation of the Leadership for Inclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme*.

³¹ See: <https://www.microsoft.com/en-US/microsoft-teams/group-chat-software>

On foot of the external examiners' annual reports, an action plan is developed by the National Programme Coordinator in conjunction with the LINC Programme tutor team. The National Programme Coordinator updates the Steering Group annually on the implementation of the action plan. Furthermore, a summary of actions following each recommendation is provided to the external examiners upon their subsequent visit in order to maintain transparency. In 2018, a full review of the LINC Programme content and material was undertaken which responded to student survey data and feedback and recommendations from external examiners. Subsequent changes to the programme included, for example, removal of repetition across the programme, full redevelopment of module 1 and partial redevelopment of modules 4 and 5. This process of a LINC Programme review has been maintained since, in which the LINC National Coordinator and LINC team review the LINC material in line with new policy, research and practices in the early years sector along with student and external examiner feedback, and incorporate updates to the programme material accordingly. As emphasised by the external examiners' report in 2019/20 (see Appendix G), the examiners were satisfied with the implementation of their recommendations to date.

Summary

The LINC Consortium has adopted stringent protocols for ensuring the continued implementation of a high-quality programme that guarantees fairness for learners on a programme that welcomes large cohorts of students and is delivered by 9–10 tutors across Ireland. The processes established to ensure academic standardisation across the student cohorts were commended in the external examiners' reviews in 2018/19 and 2019/20. External examiners were also satisfied with the incorporation of their recommendations into the programme content and delivery to date.

Documentary analysis of the 2018/19 quality control visits indicated high levels of satisfaction with the quality of programme content and delivery, participant engagement and venues. Each of these key areas of programme quality achieved ratings of often/very good for each criterion. Additional comments made by quality controllers echoed these positive results. However, a number of comments made by quality controllers did highlight several points for future consideration such as

increasing the role of the assistant tutor and restructuring the format of group discussions and room layout. These points, alongside recommendations from external examiners and feedback from student evaluation surveys, were discussed during review meetings which take place periodically among the LINC team, and necessary amendments to the programme were implemented based on these data.



CHAPTER 6: LINC TUTOR INTERVIEWS

As internal stakeholders, tutors on the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme were invited to take part in semi-structured telephone interviews as part of the present evaluation. Interviews with nine tutors were conducted by the LINC researcher and took place between 04/11/19 and 22/11/19. The semi-structured interview questions focused on tutors' perceptions of the impact of the LINC Programme on the early learning and care (ELC) sector; the impact of LINC on inclusion in early years settings; and the impact of LINC on the students who participated in the programme (see Appendix H for interview schedule). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed in NVivo³² using thematic analysis. The data were analysed with reference to Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase guide to thematic analysis³³ as summarised in Table 14 below.

Table 14. Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis

Step 1.	Become familiar with data
Step 2.	Generate initial codes
Step 3.	Collate codes into themes
Step 4.	Review themes
Step 5.	Refine, define and name themes
Step 6.	Write-up

This analysis identified six key themes. The themes and sub-themes are presented below.

³² QSR International (2018) *NVivo 12 Pro*.

³³ Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2006) 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>.

Theme 1: LINC is Different

The perception of tutors that the LINC Programme is different to other programmes was identified as a key theme. This difference was described in a number of areas as outlined in the sub-themes below.

Sub-Theme: Tutor Support of Students

Many tutors commented that their role is different to other tutor roles, identifying the centrality of the tutors' relationship with their students to the learning on the LINC Programme. Most tutors spoke about 'supporting' students as an important element of this relationship, ranging from providing email and telephone support on ICT and practical issues to getting to know students' 'individual stories' and providing emotional support. Tutors indicated that this commitment to supporting students is necessary in order to keep some of them engaged with the programme. Furthermore, tutors' 'on the ground' experience of practice was identified by some interviewees as important to students and as a factor which enhances the way that students and tutors relate to each other:

We're bringing them from the beginning of their journey to the end of their journey and we're there supporting them all the way. Which I think is very different for the students. And it's very different for me from other teaching roles, where you're maybe just getting students through a module of time.

The mentoring visit was also identified by all interviewees as a central element of the LINC tutor role. It was described by most tutors as a unique element of the LINC Programme and, confirming its association with positive impacts of continuing professional development (CPD) programmes,³⁴ they noted its centrality in establishing and maintaining a connection with students. Tutors highlighted that the visit allowed them to have one-to-one contact with students which permitted the development of a more nuanced and supportive relationship between tutor and student.

³⁴ Peleman, B., Lazzari, A., Budginalté, I., Slarova, H., Hauari, H., Peeters, J. and Cameron, C. (2018) *Continuous professional development and ECEC quality: Findings from a European systematic literature review*, Dublin: Eurofound.

Because again it's their only opportunity to get you on a one-to-one. To have their questions answered, or advice you know, or just to sound off. They might not feel comfortable doing it in the large group when we're at face-to-face, or even in the forum chat they often, you know the tutorials, they might be a little bit restricted in what they'll say. So when you get to that mentoring visit, it's full on.

Sub-Theme: Adult Learning

Some tutors referred to the way in which the LINC Programme incorporates students' prior learning and experience as a positive and unique aspect of the programme. In particular, the face-to-face sessions were identified as a forum where students could share their experiences and have the value of those experiences validated by their peers and tutors. Tutors referred to the positive impact this could have on students' confidence as learners and practitioners:

I know people have kind of said they have done either an online course before this or they've gone back and done a course in the evening in a college but they kind of say, they either felt like they were back in school ... and they don't feel that when they're on LINC, they actually feel they get a chance to share their ideas ... so they grow with their confidence to go, actually the ideas I have and the experience I have working in settings is really valuable to share.

Theme 2: The Leadership Element of the INclusion CO-ordinator Role

The importance of the leadership component of the INclusion CO-ordinator (INCO) role was another key theme which was identified by the present analysis. The elements of leadership highlighted by tutors are outlined in the sub-themes below.

Sub-Theme: Challenging and Rewarding

All tutors referred to the importance of the leadership component of the INCO role. There was an acknowledgement that this aspect of the role can be both challenging and rewarding for students and INCOs. Many tutors emphasised the positive impact that successfully leading in a setting can have on the confidence, practice and perceived status of students and INCOs, particularly those who had not previously thought of themselves as leaders:

For them to try and develop leadership skills in the service can also be the hardest challenge ... So that if they have something that has worked with a particular child that they go into another room and make that suggestion ... their opinion of themselves changes and other people's opinion of them changes, they start to be looked at differently. And I definitely think it has an impact in terms of the way they view themselves, their professionalism, and also their confidence and capability starts to grow. It's empowering.

One interviewee also highlighted the potential of the programme to have a positive impact on the leadership style of experienced leaders in settings:

But those managers, and those supervisors that come to LINC. [It] definitely challenges them to assess how they are leading already ... so we're sort of looking at what are the challenges for the child and what are the strategies we're going to use. They also have to look at those challenges and strategies in their leadership styles, or what they're encountering with their staff as well. So they're transferring that over.

Sub-Theme: Setting Context and Leadership

Most of the tutors noted the importance of setting context to the leadership opportunities available to INCOs and students. Tutors emphasised that INCOs and students working in settings where managers are supportive, or where a whole-setting approach to inclusion is adopted, are more likely to be successful at leading in inclusive practice, inclusive culture and inclusive pedagogy. The status of the student within the setting prior to starting the programme was also identified as a factor that might influence successful leadership:

So some individuals might be a teacher in their setting, some may be a room leader, some may be a manager and I suppose depending how supportive the setting is, what kind of resources, what kind of time, things that they have, that does have an impact. And I have heard stories whereby individuals are really passionate, want to make changes but ... they're not in a leadership role within their service and that can be a challenge.

Some tutors also articulated that not being facilitated to lead in a setting can act as a catalyst for students and INCOs to move to another setting where they would receive support to implement their role more fully. This potential for movement between

settings was described by one tutor as proactive and empowering and as an example of leadership in itself (i.e. taking the decision to move to a more supportive workplace):

Sometimes then they struggle and this is where the conflict comes in for them and sometimes they move on, that they absolutely realise that in actual fact they're never going to be able to lead within the environment that they're in ... But I think in itself that is leadership. The skills that they're learning, because they're learning to stand up and to be able to recognise that they're not gonna get the opportunity to put the skills in place that they've developed, and they'll move on.

Some tutors made suggestions as to how to support INCOs in the leadership aspects of their role. The focus of these discussions was on the need for a 'buy-in' from settings when they nominate an employee to undertake the LINC Programme. Suggestions on how to ensure this 'buy-in' ranged from requiring the setting to sign an undertaking to support the INCO in their role to encouraging the setting to adopt a whole-service approach to inclusion. There was also an acknowledgement of the importance of providing settings with information about the role of the INCO at an early stage and how this had improved over the years of LINC:

I think maybe if there was a more whole-of-setting approach to it from the very beginning and everybody was expected to buy in some ways, it would be a really good starting point at the beginning of a year.

Theme 3: Networking and Peer Learning

The process of networking and peer learning among students was identified as another key theme. Most tutors identified social media as the key method students used to network outside of LINC (WhatsApp³⁵ groups were the most commonly-mentioned forum). Tutors described how these groups could develop into 'communities of practice' where students share inclusion strategies that have worked for them. This type of networking was largely referred to as a positive experience for students and as particularly helpful for students who work on their own or in isolation from other INCOs.

³⁵ See: <https://www.whatsapp.com/>

The other aspect of networking and peer learning identified by tutors was that undertaken in LINC fora, particularly at face-to-face sessions. Again, this was seen as particularly helpful for students who work on their own or in isolation from other INCOs. Some tutors noted that students use the face-to-face sessions in particular as a 'safe place to talk' and as a forum to address anxiety and reduce isolation.

But if you can drive it as a community of practice where we're supporting each other, it absolutely is hugely valid. Because we have a lot of INCOs that are working in isolation. You know we have a lot of services that come to us, and they're a two-person or a one-person operation. They need that support, they need that sounding board. And that's what they become to each other, sounding boards. Which is massive.

Theme 4: Impact of LINC Programme on Students

All Tutors considered that LINC had a positive impact on students. Tutors conceptualised this positive impact at a number of levels as illustrated in the sub-themes below.

Sub-Theme: Reflective Practice

All tutors referred to their perception of significant and positive changes in practice for most students on the programme. A few tutors spoke about the positive impact on basic practice skills (examples included documenting and auditing, using social stories and visual aids, circle time practices). Many tutors also specifically referred to the programme's emphasis on reflective practice and observation and how this enhances students' competence and practice with regards to inclusion:

I think there's a lot of inbuilt reflection or something on LINC, that even if you didn't want to be a reflective practitioner, you can't help but become a reflective practitioner by going through the portfolio process, the mentoring visit, they go through the forum posts. By the time they do their portfolio they've really actually got a sense of inclusive culture, inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy.

Many tutors identified the development of critical and independent thinking as among the most important skills that students take from the LINC Programme. Tutors described this in terms of students learning how to access information for themselves

as opposed to being confined to the information available directly through programme materials. This, in turn, was seen as facilitating students to try new approaches and strategies to promote inclusion in their setting. Another aspect of critical thinking highlighted by tutors is the ability to analyse the root causes of challenges that children may be experiencing in settings and to access research and other resources to support these children:

And the other thing I think, and I really promote and I push with my students, is that we always question everything ... You know, we don't just sit back and take it as a given ... to question, why wouldn't we be able to do this or why wouldn't we be able to do that. ... Let's see what we can do to support that child. So always to be questioning what we're doing and why we're doing it and how we're doing it.

Sub-Theme: Collaboration with Parents and Other Professionals

Most tutors referred to the impact of the LINC Programme on students' collaborative practice skills. In this context, two key aspects of collaborative practice were identified: working with parents and working with other professionals.

Tutors identified developing collaboration with parents around their child's additional needs as one of the key learning points on the programme. For example, one interviewee referred to the importance of understanding the processes involved in approaching and collaborating with a parent, and developing a 'stand-back ability':

So prior to doing LINC they may have approached the parent, number one, too early in the year, or number two, without sufficient evidence. So now, when they approach a parent, they realise the need for having observations. They realise the need for actually, you know, not deciding, or not diagnosing, and not even suggesting a diagnosis. That really that they step back ... Talk the parent through it. And then get Better Start involved or then get AIM involved. Because I think that confidence and even, the flash point that can often come with meeting parents, that's where the professionalisation comes in.

Developing collaborative practice skills in relation to other professionals was also identified as a key learning outcome that students take from the programme. In this context, tutors referred to students having an increased sense of themselves as professionals, and, consequently, an increased confidence in their interaction with

other professionals. The importance of acquiring the appropriate language for collaborating with both parents and professionals was also highlighted by many tutors:

... they've got a new level of language. They've got a much more organised approach. So, in other words if somebody is coming into their room about a child they are now equally involved ... Now they realise that OK, we're gonna do this as a collaboration, and if that child needs something done, you're going to talk to whoever has come in and ask them for their ideas or their suggestions and work together with them. So that if a suggestion is made that you could then say whether you think it can work or not work, but in a manner that you have confidence with.

Sub-Theme: Confidence as Learners

As well as gaining confidence in students' professional work, most tutors spoke of their perceiving an improvement in the academic and learning skills of many students and of a consequent increase in their confidence as learners. For example, one tutor spoke about students' progress from 'fear' to 'pride' to 'confidence', whilst another spoke about the students' journey from 'nervous' to 'confident' learners, particularly with regard to students who are returning to education after a long period. Many tutors also indicated that this increase in confidence as learners empowered students to move on to further education:

... So many of them come in and they don't feel like they're competent learners at all. They're so nervous about the technology but they're so nervous about even putting words down in an assignment ... And then, you see them come along over the weeks and the months, you really do see them grow. And a lot of them by module five and module six they're sort of thriving. I have like lots of examples where students have and by the kind of May time to say to you actually I'm going to go on and do my level seven, I've applied, I've put my application in to do a degree...

Theme 5: Impact of LINC Programme on ELC Sector

Tutors' perceptions of the impact of the LINC Programme on the ELC sector are outlined in the sub-themes below.

Sub-Theme: The Impact of LINC ‘in the Room’

All tutors identified the most important impact of the LINC Programme on the ELC sector as the increase of skills, competencies and information of practitioners ‘in the room’. The converse of this is the tutors’ perception that there continues to be a non-inclusive practice in settings and that a programme such as LINC is needed to counteract this. Many tutors referred to their experience of students employing LINC strategies and skills they have learned from their engagement in the early stages of the programme, suggesting an almost immediate impact on settings and children:

... the feedback from all of the students constantly is they love how practical the suggestions are ... they have commented to me that they find the strategies that we would give, because they’re so hands on, have been really beneficial so in terms of the impact, I think the impact is directly in the room, and to the children.

Some tutors also referred to the value placed on the LINC Programme by setting managers and to feedback they received from settings that they wish all staff could avail of LINC:

I think you know even the feedback from the students when we go out on the mentoring visits and feedback from the managers ... it’s like, you know, I think every worker here should do the LINC Programme, I think it should be open to everybody. So yeah, and I think it should be too.

Sub-Theme: Other Organisations and LINC

Tutors expressed diverse opinions when asked about the level of knowledge regarding the LINC Programme in other organisations that work with children with additional needs. Whilst a few tutors felt that LINC is widely known about in organisations operating in the ELC sector and that its profile is increasing, others reported that some students had experienced a disconnect between the strategies advocated in the LINC Programme and those advocated by other organisations working with children in their setting:

But at this moment in time, feedback is often that you know speech and language therapists or maybe even special needs assistants that may come with children from somewhere like ... or many others would not be on the same page.

Having completed the LINC Programme, many tutors referred positively to the impact of the Better Start cohort. Tutors felt that going forward, there would be more consistency between the strategies advocated in the LINC Programme and the support given by the Early Years Specialists (EYS) in settings, an increased awareness among EYS of the LINC Programme as well as an increased appreciation among EYS of the professional status of the INCO.

Sub-Theme: Confidence to Include

A few tutors highlighted that completing the LINC Programme addresses the ‘fear’ of registering a child with additional needs that settings have faced in the past. These tutors emphasised that this fear may be due to the limited training or continuing professional development (CPD) that was provided to the ELC sector prior to the implementation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) and that the knowledge and skills gained through the LINC Programme gives settings, early years teachers and INCOs the confidence to enrol and include all children in their settings and to support children’s individual needs:

... A lot of the services maybe five or six years ago or more had a fear of taking children with additional needs. That had a negative impact on children because maybe they started school without having had any preschool because they couldn’t find a place to go to. Or they started in a specialised preschool maybe which they really didn’t need. So now an awful lot of children, unless they have very severe problems, services are willing to take them in, specifically, I think specifically because of LINC and because of the knowledge they have gained and it has reduced their fear element because they know that they look at the children’s needs as signposts and they’re able to put strategies in place.

Theme 6: Impact of LINC Programme on Children and Families

Tutors stated that they were limited in what they could say in this regard but had discerned the impact of the LINC Programme on children and families to an extent through observation of practice at mentoring visits, through student assignments, through feedback from students and as early years teachers themselves. Most tutors identified the improved practice and understanding of INCOs and students as the most

important impact that the programme has had on children and their families. Tutors provided examples of enhanced practice that they had come across. For instance, one tutor described a change in practice that arose from their student's deeper understanding of inclusion:

So I've had a student scenario, you know, where she's really said, 'actually, I realised I wasn't being fully inclusive, I was integrating the child'. And it's when she's made that connection through all the lessons, and she kind of realised actually including that child who uses special equipment ... and she realised actually I'll take him out of this chair and I'll set up things so he can be fully immersed with the other children. And it was like those little moments people tell you, of things they, and for me I go 'oh wow'. Because she'll never be, she'll always be like that now with every child, that won't change with her, she's got it now. And that child in particular benefited. You kind of know that will carry on. She'll do that for other children as well.

All tutors emphasised the distinction between integration and inclusion and that this distinction is central to the skills and competencies promoted through the LINC Programme. Many tutors articulated a perception that practice in the past was focused on integration and that LINC was contributing to a move towards inclusive practice. The role of the INCO was also seen as a bulwark against a return to integration:

Services can apply for AIM support, and get AIM support obviously without having an INCO in it. However, I feel it's a much more beneficial model where there is an INCO in the service because they have the training as well. So my fear would be in some ways that [if] it just was AIM alone where there isn't an INCO we could go back to very much a model of integration rather than full inclusion. And you know, I think really for children with disabilities, people do need the training around it to support those children.

Finally, two tutors highlighted the importance of parents' knowledge of the LINC Programme and of AIM services more generally. Both indicated that they believed that many parents are still unaware of the services available and may not be aware of the role of the INCO:

There's still a lot of families that wouldn't know about it. So, I suppose it's around services I think promoting it and saying we have an INclusion CO-ordinator, you know maybe in your parents' booklet and what that entails and things like that you know.

Summary

The interviews with LINC Programme tutors provided important insights into the LINC Tutors' perspectives on the impact of the LINC Programme on students, the ELC setting as well as children and families. These interviews emphasised the unique aspects of the programme which tutors considered to have enhanced learners' understanding of leadership for inclusion and that they perceived to be integrated into practice very quickly by early childhood teachers on the programme. These points may be important to consider in the design of future professional development programmes within the sector.

The impact on participant confidence was raised by tutors in relation to both their professional and academic endeavours. The tutors indicated that participating in the LINC Programme gave many students the confidence to pursue further education and showed them the value of this, given the importance of CPD in the ELC sector. The opportunities for networking and the positive impact of the sharing of ideas on practice were also highlighted by tutors.

Barriers to implementing inclusive practices were referred to as existing management structures in settings and the need for targeted support from management in this regard. Suggestions for working more effectively with settings where a staff member was undertaking the LINC Programme were noted. The importance of an increased awareness of the role of INCO for parents was also discussed.

Overall, the tutors were very positive about the need for a programme like LINC and felt encouraged about their own role in the programme.

CHAPTER 7: STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATIONS

In order to establish the perceptions and views of key stakeholders in relation to the impact of the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme from a macro-level perspective, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three INclusion CO-ordinators (INCOs), three parents of children with additional needs and three informants from departments and organisations with responsibility for early childhood care and education (ECCE), policy and practice.

Past students of the LINC Programme were emailed to elicit their interest in taking part in this strand of the evaluation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an INCO from three settings across Ireland (Cork, Clare and Dublin). Two of these settings were community-based services whilst one was a privately-owned, sole-provider service. The semi-structured interviews explored the INCO's previous professional education and continuing professional development (CPD) experiences; the concept of early years education for children with additional needs; their decision to apply for the LINC Programme and their experience of the programme; pedagogy and assessment; parental involvement; and support structures (see Appendix I for the interview schedule).

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of children with additional needs attending each of the three settings (one parent per setting was interviewed). The semi-structured interviews focused on parents' experiences of enrolling their children in preschool, the supports they received, their satisfaction with the provision and support structures, and parental involvement within the setting (see Appendix J for the interview schedule).

Lastly, key-informant interviews were conducted with two representatives from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and one representative from Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The evaluation team had planned to engage in wider stakeholder consultation with representatives of key

government departments/agencies involved in the development of ECCE.³⁶ However, due to time constraints, it was possible to conduct three key-informant interviews only.

Each of the three informants invited to take part in this strand of the evaluation was experienced in the area of inclusion within early learning and care (ELC). One DCEDIY representative was involved with the development of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) and was responsible for overseeing its initial roll-out, including commissioning and overseeing the LINC Programme (DCEDIY representative 1). The second DCEDIY representative was responsible for the policy direction and funding of AIM (DCEDIY representative 2). The role of the representative from Tusla was within the Tusla Early Years Inspectorate, which is responsible for inspecting ELC services.³⁷ This informant had directly encountered LINC Programme graduates within ELC services in their capacity as Tusla Inspector. Semi-structured telephone interviews conducted with the three key informants explored how the role of their respective organisation related to the ELC sector; the inclusion of children with additional needs in ELC; and the organisation's experience of LINC/working with graduates of the LINC Programme (see Appendix K for the interview schedule).

The interviews with the nine stakeholders were recorded, transcribed and analysed using NVivo³⁸ software. Thematic analysis of the interviews identified several overarching themes within the data. Stakeholders commented on the LINC Programme model of learning; the quality of available evidence on the impact of the LINC Programme and access to programme content; and the impact of the LINC Programme on students, the ELC setting, the wider ELC sector, and children and families.

³⁶ See: Hayes, N. and Walsh, T. (eds.) (2022) *Early childhood education and care in Ireland. Charting a century of developments (1921–2021)*, Oxford: Peter Lang; Ring, E. (2024) *Special education in an independent Ireland 1922–2022: Insights from a journey through the century*, Trim: National Council for Special Education [forthcoming].

³⁷ Duignan, M. and McDonnell, F. (2022) 'An overview of the development of government regulation and inspection in the early childhood education and care sector in Ireland', in Hayes, N. and Walsh, T., (eds.) *Early childhood education and care in Ireland*, pp. 203–228, Oxford: Peter Lang.

³⁸ QSR International (2018) *NVivo 12 Pro*.

Theme 1: LINC Programme Model of Continuing Professional Development

Stakeholders commented on the LINC Programme as a model of CPD and noted the need for CPD in the area of inclusion in ELC, the value of the programme as a model of CPD, the geographical accessibility of the programme to learners across the Republic of Ireland and the effectiveness and appropriateness of the programme's blended learning approach.

Sub-Theme: LINC is Needed

Many comments from stakeholders highlighted the need for a programme like LINC in the ELC sector. When interviewed, one parent referred to the importance of training for people working with children with additional needs, whilst all three INCOs referred to the importance of CPD in the area of inclusion. One of the representatives from the DCEDIY outlined the impetus for developing the LINC Programme, explaining that it was commissioned following a review of existing third level ECCE programmes, the content of which varied in terms of the focus on developing early childhood teachers' competencies to work effectively with children with additional needs (DCEDIY representative 1). The representative from Tusla acknowledged the need for a programme like LINC but also noted that, given the significant proportion of children with additional needs attending ELC services, inclusive practice should be a core training requirement for all ELC teachers.

One INCO referred to the benefits of CPD for ELC teachers more generally. This INCO observed that education instils 'confidence and pride' in early childhood teachers and that this, in turn, has a positive impact on children and families. They further commented that education and CPD (such as LINC) is important in keeping ELC teachers motivated and engaged in their work:

You also need to be educated you know, the staff working with the children need to be educated, so they need continuous, they need to continuously be doing workshops and things and even having emails or newsletters or anything coming in that just keeps you motivated and keeps you on top of what you are doing.

With regard to the learning outcomes of the LINC Programme specifically, one INCO commented that whilst previous education and CPD had equipped them with

knowledge of additional needs and diversity, none covered the inclusion aspect in detail or provided the practical tools to promote inclusive practice as LINC had:

So we learned all about the different types of things but not how we were going to be inclusive in our environment and how we were going to include children like that.

Another INCO commented that they were prompted to apply for the LINC Programme because the setting was struggling financially and needed the additional capitation associated with appointing an INCO. This INCO had undertaken extensive training in the area of additional needs prior to engaging with LINC and was therefore already familiar with a lot of the learning on the programme but appreciated the title and professional role gained from participating in LINC. This INCO also felt that being able to explain their new role to families increased parents' awareness of inclusion:

I'm more, I'm this person now, the INclusion CO-ordinator, or whatever, so I suppose I am communicating that more to parents and they are understanding more about what it is about like.

Sub-Theme: Quality of LINC Programme

Both representatives from the DCEDIY referred to the success and quality of the LINC Programme as a model of CPD. One commented that the programme model was effective in upskilling a large number of early childhood teachers which, in turn, was having a rapid effect on the quality of provision across a wide range of settings (DCEDIY representative 1). The other commented that the DCEDIY stands over the programme and this is reflected in the fact that the department makes available extra capitation to services with an INCO (DCEDIY representative 2):

I suppose in terms of the you know the content and the quality of the training, it's a specially commissioned training programme, so we can stand over it because we are you know we are linking funding through the INclusion CO-ordinator payments, we are linking funding to completion of the training. So, it's valuable not only that there was training like it, but that it is you know sort of quality-assured and appropriate training.

The representative from Tusla emphasised the importance of having qualified staff working with children and commended any approach to further educating the ELC workforce.

Sub-Theme: Accessibility

When interviewed, many stakeholders referred to the accessibility of the LINC Programme. All three informants from the DCEDIY and Tusla commented on the LINC Programme's geographical accessibility to learners. One representative from the DCEDIY remarked that the geographical accessibility of the LINC Programme, which is delivered in centres across Ireland, was important so that the goal of appointing an INCO in every service delivering the ECCE programme³⁹ was achieved (DCEDIY representative 2). The representative from Tusla suggested that providing advance information regarding future centre locations would allow potential students to plan better when to undertake the programme and enhance accessibility. Whilst the programme has currently moved fully online, this point will be taken into consideration should the programme return to a blended model of delivery in the future.

Further to comments on the geographical accessibility of the LINC Programme, one of the representatives from the DCEDIY referred to the programme's blended learning approach as a means to reducing barriers to participation (DCEDIY representative 1). The other representative from the DCEDIY also spoke of the accessibility of the programme's delivery model in addition to commenting that the blended learning approach, with >80% online, was 'effective and appropriate' for early childhood teachers who already had busy workloads (DCEDIY representative 2). One INCO referred to the accessibility of the LINC Programme materials, commenting that different adult learning preferences were accommodated by the programme's various online andragogical approaches:

³⁹ In 2010, a universal free early childhood care and education (ECCE) scheme was introduced by the government for children for children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 7 months, applied to children from their third birthday in 2016 and extended to 2 years' duration in 2018. Focused on providing children with formal early learning experiences, promoting better socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes and narrowing the attainment gap between less and more advantaged children, over 800,000 children have accessed the programme, which has an uptake of more than 95%. Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2022) 'Minister O'Gorman awards contract for independent review of the early childhood care and education (ECCE) programme, *Press Release, Friday 5 August 2022*, Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/5d180-minister-ogorman-awards-contract-for-independent-review-of-the-early-childhood-care-and-education-ecce-programme/>
See: O'Sullivan, L. and Ring, E. (2023) 'On the path to developing a high-quality inclusive preschool system in the Irish context: Outcomes from a systemic focus on structural and process quality dimensions', in Şenol, H. (ed.), *Recent perspectives on preschool education and care*, IntechOpen, DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.113764

... there was some really good links and even visual stuff because it is easier for some people to learn visually.

This INCO also commented that it was the first time they had undertaken a blended learning programme and although it was challenging, they felt supported by their peers and tutor.

Theme 2: Communications and Research

The interviews revealed that key informants would appreciate greater access to LINC Programme content and evidence of its impact on practice. These comments may be useful in informing the direction of future evaluations of the LINC Programmes and for managing relationships with key stakeholders.

Sub-Theme: Access to Content

The possibility of relevant stakeholders involved in supporting ELC settings having direct access to the LINC content was raised as a point of discussion. This was mentioned in the context of the LINC Consortium receiving requests from multiple stakeholders in relation to releasing the LINC Programme content. Having carefully considered these requests, the LINC Consortium has adopted the position that releasing content divorced from learner experience in engaging with the programme could potentially be damaging to the programme in terms of leading to misinterpretation and inchoate understanding. On receipt of these requests, the LINC Consortium has invited relevant stakeholders to meet and provide an overview of the learning outcomes of the programme rather than share the programme's content.

Sub-Theme: Quality of Evidence-Base

Each of the three informants from the DCEDIY and Tusla referred to the challenges in discerning the impact of the LINC Programme on graduates' practice in relation to leading inclusion from existing research. One of the representatives from the DCEDIY commented that they would like to see conclusive evidence of the programme's impact on practice (DCEDIY representative 2). The other representative demonstrated

awareness of findings emerging from the end-of-year one evaluation of AIM,⁴⁰ which involved a number of LINC graduates (DCEDIY representative 1). Both representatives from the DCEDIY could, however, refer to self-reported evidence that the LINC Programme has had an impact on LINC graduates' competency to lead in inclusion:

Yeah, I mean again, again we are short of I suppose we haven't had an impact evaluation that would allow us to give a definitive answer, but, the you know the anecdotal evidence that we're receiving is certainly suggesting that there, that LINC is having a very positive impact on practice...

The representative from Tusla felt that they did not have enough exposure to LINC graduates to draw concrete conclusions. However, the representative did allude to the fact that children with additional needs attending a particular service provided indirect evidence of inclusive practice within that setting. This informant repeatedly commented that, at present, available evidence of the efficacy of the LINC Programme could not determine whether it was more or less effective than other CPD programmes.

Theme 3: Perceived Impact of LINC Programme

Be that as it may, many comments from interviewees suggested that key stakeholders had a good sense of the LINC Programme's impact on graduates, on ELC settings, on the ELC sector, and on children and families.

Sub-Theme: Impact on Graduates

Interviews with key stakeholders provided insight into how the LINC Programme was progressing in effecting qualitative shifts in early years teachers' knowledge(s), practices and values as they relate to leading inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy. When interviewed, INCOs referred to the practical skills and strategies they took from the programme in addition to their enhanced awareness of inclusion and increased

confidence and motivation in their work. One INCO described the LINC Programme as very beneficial in helping them to provide for children with additional needs in the setting and stated that the programme had a positive impact on their motivation for working with children with additional needs. Another INCO spoke of the learning they acquired through LINC and other training which gave them the confidence to be more creative and inclusive in their work. One informant from the DCEDIY referred to LINC students' overall satisfaction with the programme (DCEDIY representative 1), whilst the representative from Tusla commented on the pride LINC graduates take from their new role as INCO:

... in fairness to all of the staff that have been trained as LINC coordinators, they're very proud of being a LINC coordinator.

Whilst acknowledging the limitations in what they could say in this regard, each of the three informants from the DCEDIY and Tusla felt that the LINC Programme was effective in upskilling graduates. These informants perceived that the LINC Programme improved graduates' capacity and confidence in working with children with additional needs and their families (DCEDIY representative 1) and that their practice was more inclusive following completion of the programme (Tusla representative). Each of the three INCOs also demonstrated an appreciation of their own role and responsibilities in leading inclusion in their settings. INCOs spoke of taking responsibility for plans, observations and paperwork specifically related to inclusion in addition to collaborating with parents and other professionals. One of the representatives from the DCEDIY referred to findings from the end-of-year one evaluation of AIM which suggested that LINC Programme graduates felt well prepared to lead inclusion in their settings and that the programme had provided them with a new perspective on inclusive practice:

I suppose it gave them a new lens in terms of their practice and to create an inclusive environment for children.

All three INCOs referred to their increased propensity for reflective practice following the programme and how this enhanced inclusion in the setting. One INCO commented that upon completing the LINC Programme, they reflected on previous practice and situations and had come to realise that they had not been inclusive:

⁴⁰ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2019) *An end of year one review of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)*, Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs, available at: <https://aim.gov.ie/app/uploads/2021/05/AIM-end-of-year-one-review.pdf>

Although the child was 'in' the room, it wasn't really inclusive, they were just there as a separate entity almost within the group.

Two INCOs also spoke of an increased tendency to reflect on children's individual needs and provided examples of the adaptations they had made in the environment to include all children:

I'm taking, how would you say it, more time about thinking about what children need and to support them in the setting.

Sub-Theme: Impact on Settings

Interviews with key stakeholders highlighted the impact of the LINC Programme on settings in relation to the application of the programme's learning to practice and sharing this learning with colleagues. The three key informants from the DCEDIY and Tusla referred to the impact of having an INCO in the setting who could support other staff in upskilling (DCEDIY representative 1), increase the capacity of services to be more inclusive (all three informants) and improve the quality of practice in settings more generally (DCEDIY representative 2).

All three INCOs referred to bringing LINC Programme resources and learning back to the setting to share with colleagues. One INCO had become an employer since completing the programme and spoke about sharing LINC learning with their new staff member and the challenges this entailed given their own increased workload as INCO and room leader. Two INCOs further commented that it could be difficult to impart fully the learning from the programme to someone who had not had the benefit of completing it themselves and may differ in their level of motivation to expand their awareness of inclusion:

You know because I have the LINC training done, things get watered down as training, and you can try and convey ideas to somebody, but when we spent a full year submersed in that, obviously you are more convicted to what you are doing but you are trying to relay that to somebody else, the importance of what you are doing and why it is so important and it is difficult sometimes then to try and portray that and make somebody else feel as strongly about it as you are.

In order to facilitate this process, one INCO commented that they would like to have continued access to the LINC Programme resources to share with staff in their setting. Another INCO elaborated that the opportunity for the entire staff to complete the programme together would increase its impact on the setting and affect positive change on the setting's collective attitude towards inclusion.

With regard to the application of the programme's learning to practice, it was clear from interviews with INCOs and parents that strategies were in place to promote the participation of all children in learning in the setting. INCOs spoke about their increased tendency to take on board the child's views and preferences following the programme, leading to an emergent, more child-centred curriculum in the setting. One INCO spoke about spending more time with children on a one-to-one basis and stated that their learning through LINC had encouraged them in this approach. Another INCO referred to the inclusive strategies that they had incorporated into the setting since their experience of the LINC Programme. These strategies included a more flexible approach to taking attendance, 'first-and-then' photos of daily routines, and using more props and encouraging inclusion during 'circle time'. All three INCOs discussed using visual aids and the AIM play resources and their benefit to children in the setting. Two INCOs identified AIM as a key source of support and described positive working relationships with the Early Years Specialist (EYS). Finally, one parent expressed an awareness of Aistear⁴¹ and the setting's play-based curriculum and felt this approach was appropriate for supporting their child's learning.

On the other hand, the representative from Tusla felt that the impact of the LINC Programme across settings was not uniform but may become more apparent over time:

Has it brought about change? It certainly has in patches. And I think time will tell...

The representative from Tusla also commented that some settings they had inspected would already have been considered inclusive services prior to appointing an INCO. This informant also queried whether there might be incidences of settings nominating

⁴¹ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) *Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework*, Dublin: The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment.

a staff member for the LINC Programme in order to receive the additional capitation but failing to incorporate any changes into the setting and speculated whether this could lead to staff turnover. This informant further questioned the LINC Programme's capacity to affect provision for children with additional needs in single-handed provider settings. Lastly, the representative from Tusla commented that they had observed settings becoming more inclusive where no staff member had undertaken the LINC Programme, evidenced by an increase in the use of AIM resources.

Sub-Theme: Impact on Sector

Stakeholders also provided insight into their perspectives on the LINC Programme's progress in promoting inclusion in the early years and its contribution to the professionalisation of the ELC sector. One of the representatives from the DCEDIY commented on the LINC Programme's contribution to standardising the quality of inclusive provision across ELC settings in Ireland (DCEDIY representative 1), whilst the other informant from the DCEDIY elaborated on how the LINC Programme complemented other training strategies being carried out under AIM in order to upskill the ELC workforce in equality, diversity and inclusion (DCEDIY representative 2):

I think we are upskilling the sector and we are doing it in a way that everyone will share a common language, they'll come from a similar course, which has been quality assured, and they'll hopefully think and speak in the same language across settings.

One of the representatives from the DCEDIY further acknowledged that the LINC Programme was highly regarded within the ELC sector and commented that this recognition was reflected in the awards the programme has been nominated for and won (DCEDIY representative 2). This representative also referred to the LINC Programme's contribution to the professionalisation of the sector, as ELC teachers were achieving Level 6 Special Purpose awards through their participation. The other DCEDIY representative also raised this latter point and commended the volume of ELC teachers who had completed the programme and obtained this award to date (DCEDIY representative 1). As previously mentioned, one INCO appreciated the professional title gained from participating in the programme and felt that it benefited parents' understanding and awareness of inclusion in the early years. The representative from Tusla expressed the view that CPD and the extra capitation

provided to services with an appointed INCO were important elements in professionalising the ELC sector.

Whilst many stakeholders commented on the status of INCOs in the ELC sector, one INCO referred to the challenges involved in raising parents' awareness of the range of CPD undertaken by the ELC workforce and the relevant associated qualifications. This observation was corroborated by the interviews with parents for this research where there were varying levels of awareness of the role of the INCO among the parents. One parent was not aware of the title INCO, but could name the individual who was responsible for inclusion in the setting. Another parent identified the INCO as their key contact in the setting and was aware of the title INCO. However, when asked, they were not able to give a more detailed description of their role. This parent did however comment that they had previously worked in the area of autism, but since their own child had started attending ELC, they had learned much more about additional needs through engaging with the setting's INCO. Finally, one parent was aware of the title INCO and had a clear understanding of their role in supporting inclusion for all children in the setting.

Sub-Theme: Impact on Children and Families

Interviews with key stakeholders provided preliminary insight into the LINC Programme's impact on children and families. One of the representatives from the DCEDIY referred to the benefits of having an INCO based full-time in the setting to offer support to children and families and the positive impact this would have on children's experiences of ELC (DCEDIY representative 1). This representative also commented that the positive effect of standardising the quality of inclusive provision across settings through the LINC Programme would be that all children were provided with equal opportunities to participate in ELC services across the Republic of Ireland (DCEDIY representative 1):

... so whatever county they live in, whatever setting they access, currently the early childhood care and education programme, they should receive the same level of inclusive provision.

The representative from Tusla echoed this sentiment and commented that the long-term outcome of the LINC Programme may be made evident by a more widespread enrolment of children with diverse additional needs across ELC settings.

Overall, parents reported that their children enjoyed attending their ELC setting, felt their child's interests and needs were being met and spoke positively about their interactions with the INCO. Comments from INCOs and parents indicated that children with additional needs were valued within the ELC setting and that experiences were planned with the needs and interests of all children in mind. One INCO expressed that their setting was welcoming to all children and that they themselves treated each child as an individual, more so after the experience of LINC – 'I take more of an inside interest in the child.' The parent of a child with additional needs attending this setting echoed this sentiment and believed that their son was 'comfortable' in the setting and was 'known' by the INCO. Another parent noted that the INCO was aware of their child's individual interests and knew their favourite songs and toys. All parents and INCOs spoke positively about the care taken in each of the three settings to ensure transitions were a positive experience for children:

I know if, let's say, I thought she was a bit off; I would text [the INCO] and say she is a bit off, but I will chance her and see, and [the INCO] might set up her favourite activity, or for when she comes in, she might set up water play or something like that just to settle her in, and they know how to settle her, their own strategies to settle her are different to what we would do, but they know her favourite toys and the songs she likes.

It was also clear from the interviews with INCOs and parents that external assistance was elicited where required to support the setting to meet children's additional needs. One parent referred to the support they received from the INCO when communicating with a speech and language therapist. Another INCO commented that the addition of an AIM support teacher to the service to reduce the adult/child ratio in the room had a visible impact on the development and behaviour of a child with additional needs and had improved their relationship with other children in the setting:

... Having one-to-one is just, it has just made such a difference this year like, huge difference in the room, huge difference in the other children, how they have relaxed around [child's name], huge difference in him and how he has developed, everything!

Each parent also provided examples of support they had received from the INCO which had a positive effect on their child. These examples included applying for AIM supports, deciding whether a child was ready to transition to primary school and deciding to increase a child's number of days in the setting. Parents and INCOs commented on the care, consideration and collaboration employed during these periods, and it was clear from parents' comments that they held the INCO's opinions in high regard:

Overall, I am very happy with him going to that playschool, you know [the INCO] is very, very good, she takes every child individually, you know, she knows everything about them, she is very good to tell you her own opinion on things.

It was evident, however, that there were varying levels of information shared between the different settings and parents. One parent indicated that they did not receive any information on their child's learning activities, except from the child himself. On the other hand, comments from the other two parents indicated they had a good sense of their child's activities in the setting. From the point of view of the setting, one INCO voiced frustration regarding some parents' reluctance to share information from specialists or other services about their child's additional needs. The INCO felt that this undermined the setting's effectiveness in working with the child's additional needs:

I just feel that the information, that if a child is attending a specialist that everyone, whether they are in school or preschool, that the preschool should be able to access information, I know now really I suppose that it is up to the parents but you know I find that frustrating you know as I say when you just don't have the information.

Summary

The LINC Programme development and roll-out involves collaboration and communication with a number of important stakeholders. The present strand of the evaluation was undertaken in order to establish the perceptions and views of key stakeholders in relation to the impact of the LINC Programme on practice from a macro-level perspective.

The findings corroborate those emerging from the other strands of the evaluation in that stakeholders had a good sense that the LINC Programme was an agent of change in improving inclusive practice in ELC settings. Stakeholders commented on the impact of the LINC Programme on learners, on settings, on the ELC sector and on children and families. Parents identified the INCO in the setting as a key contact and felt their children's interests and needs were being met. It was clear from the interviews, however, that informants from the DCEDIY and Tusla were eager to have access to further evidence of the LINC Programme's impact on practice. These informants raised important considerations with regard to evaluating CPD programmes and how impact on practice could be definitively established beyond self-reported data.

The informants also commented on the LINC Programme's success as a model of higher education. From the DCEDIY's perspective, the two stakeholders were very satisfied with the model of CPD and felt that the programme complemented other training strategies conducted under AIM. This strand of the evaluation also revealed that access to LINC Programme resources may be beneficial to key stakeholders in order to enhance their capacity to support inclusive practice across settings.

All three interviews with INCOs as part of this strand of the research referred to bringing LINC Programme resources and learning back to the setting to share with colleagues. A similar point was raised in Chapter 4 which outlined that 90% and 87% of employers in 2018/19 and 2019/20 respectively felt that the learning from the LINC Programme was being shared well/very well within their setting. The positive implications of this finding may be the continuation of best practice in a sector which typically faces high levels of staff turnover.

Although it is important to gather the views of parents, early childhood teachers and representatives from departments and agencies with responsibility for ECCE, policy and practice, a wider, more representative sample is needed to draw firm conclusions. Furthermore, settings from which parents and INCOs were drawn may not be representative of a sector in which 30% are community-based and 70% are private, with 38% based in rural areas and 62% based in urban areas.⁴²



⁴² Pobal (2019) *Early years sector profile 2018/2019*.

CHAPTER 8: CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVES

In order to capture the child's perspective on inclusion in early learning and care (ELC), children from three settings across the Republic of Ireland were invited to participate in the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme evaluation using a video and talking mats methodology, namely 'Exploring and Telling'. The concept of 'exploring' underpinning the approach is based on the potential of engaging in playful participatory approaches to enabling children's participation in research combined with the human instinct to explore and understand our environment through multi-modal representations. 'Telling' is conceptualised as communication through these multi-modal representations. This approach was developed by Ring and O'Sullivan and utilised previously in *An Evaluation of the Teach Me As I Am Early Years Programme*.⁴³ Seven children from three ELC settings where an INclusion CO-ordinator (INCO) had been appointed took part in this strand of the LINC Programme evaluation (these settings also provided the contexts from which the parents and INCOs interviewed in Chapter 7 were recruited). Participating children were all enrolled in the early childhood care and education (ECCE) scheme and included four boys and three girls.

Parental consent, consent from the setting and its practitioners and child assent were obtained prior to conducting this strand of research. Child assent forms employing visual cues were used and the aims, methods and outcomes of the study were explained in child-friendly language. The children were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, the researcher remained attuned to the child's verbal and non-verbal communication and maintained an ongoing dialogue with the child and those who understood their cues well to ensure that assent continued throughout the process.⁴⁴

⁴³ Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., O'Keeffe, S., Ferris, F. and Wall, E. (2019) *An evaluation of the Teach Me As I Am early years programme*, Dublin: ASIAM, available at: <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TeachMeAsIAM-booklet.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Loveridge, J. (ed.) (2012) *Involving children and young people in research in educational settings: Report to the Ministry of Education*, Victoria University of Wellington: Jessie Hetherington Centre for Educational Research, available at: https://thehub.swa.govt.nz/assets/documents/41137_Involving-CYP-02092010_0.pdf

Children were invited to be an explorer in their setting by wearing a child-friendly, unobtrusive camera on their clothing to capture a video record of how they experience a day in their setting. An ELC teacher in each setting was also invited to wear a camera during the session. The duration of each recording ranged from approximately 1–2 hours. One setting was also asked to record a short thirty second video of an example of inclusive practice. Children were later invited to participate in a semi-structured conversation with the LINC researcher based on the video observations and the key principles of inclusive practice identified in the literature⁴⁵ (e.g., the child's interaction with their peers and teacher; accessibility of the environment; how the child experiences play; and the activities in which the child takes part). See Appendix L for the list of interview themes.

The video footage and interview data were analysed to produce a portrait of each child's day in their setting. The LINC Programme Competency Framework for Inclusion was used as the basis for analysing the data (see Appendix B). Pseudonyms were employed in the following analyses in order to preserve participant anonymity. As the aim of this strand of the LINC Programme evaluation was to capture the child's perspective of their day in the ELC environment, the portraits which were generated from the data are presented in the first person. This encourages the reader to enter the child's internal frame of reference.

Setting 1

The first setting included in this strand of the evaluation was a sessional, community-based service located in the south-west of Ireland. This setting caters for children aged between 2 and 6 years and has the capacity to accommodate 18 children in total.

⁴⁵ Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2016) *Diversity, equality and inclusion charter and guidelines for early childhood care and education*, Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs; Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education (2006) *Síolta, The national quality framework for early childhood education handbook*, Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education; National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2009) *Aistear: The early childhood curriculum framework*; Ring, E., Daly, P. and Wall, E. (eds.) (2018) *Autism from the inside out: A handbook for parents, early childhood, primary, post-primary and special school settings*, Oxford: Peter Lang; Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., Ryan, M. and Daly, P. (eds.) (2021) *Leading inclusion from the inside out: A handbook for parents and early childhood teachers in early learning and care, primary and special school settings*, Oxford: Peter Lang.

According to the CSO 2019 area type classification,⁴⁶ the location of this setting is classified as being situated in a rural area with high urban influence.

Three children in the setting were invited to wear mini-cameras attached to their clothing for approximately two hours during the session and were told to go about their day as they normally would. A teacher in the setting (not the INCO) also wore a camera during this session, with the aim of capturing a broader overview of interactions taking place within the room, such as between the INCO and children.

First, portraits of the experiences of each child over the course of the recorded session are presented. A similar approach was taken to the research underpinning the development of Aistear, Ireland's early childhood curriculum framework.⁴⁷ These portraits are presented in the first person given that the video recordings were captured from the children's own perspectives. Next, the data from the video observations and semi-structured conversations between the children and the LINC researcher are considered with reference to the LINC Programme Competency Framework for Inclusion.

A Day in the Setting for Zane

My name is Zane and I am four years old. Today I am doing some colouring for Father's Day. When I am finished, I put the box of crayons away on the shelf, which I can easily reach. Next, I get my lunch box out of my bag to have a snack. I find my bag on a hook which has my name and photograph displayed above it. When I am finished my snack, I wash out my yoghurt pots and sing to myself. Now I start playing toy cars with my friends. Later, when the researcher asks me questions about my day, I say that cars are my favourite thing to play with in my preschool. I also tell the researcher that I like playing with dinosaurs and animals and that I can find these toys easily on the shelf because they are low down. I tell the researcher that I like playing with my friends every day at preschool.

⁴⁶ Central Statistics Office (2019) *Urban and rural life in Ireland 2019*, available at:

<https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-urli/urbanandrurallifeinireland2019/introduction/>

⁴⁷ National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (2007) *Listening for children's stories: Children as partners in the framework for early learning - A portraiture study*, Dublin: National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, available at: <https://ncca.ie/media/1113/how-aistear-was-developed-a-portraiture-study.pdf>

When I am finished playing with the cars, I put on some dress-up clothes and play magic with my friend Oona, who is also an explorer today. Afterwards, I see one of my friends getting their footprint printed on paper with paint and I ask the teacher if I can have a go next. When it is my turn my teacher helps me print my footprints and I start laughing because it tickles my feet. When it is nearly time to finish playing, the teacher tells us we have ten minutes left, and after a little while, says we have five minutes left to play. The teacher puts on some music during tidy-up time and I sing along. The teacher then tells me that today it is my turn to give out the placemats to everyone before lunch. We all have our own placemat with our photograph on it so I know who to give them to. I pushed another child who was in my way and my teacher reminded me that we don't push other people at preschool. We chatted about this and I told my friend that I was sorry that I had pushed them. During lunchtime, I talk to the researcher about my favourite books at playschool. The best ones are related to the things I love, like the book about trucks and helicopters.

A Day in the Setting for Oona

My name is Oona and I am three years old. Today we are colouring for Father's Day. Next, I get my snack from my bag. I know how to find my bag because it is on the peg that has my picture displayed above it. I join in when the class counts how many children are in school today, and then we talk about what day it is and what the weather is like. The teacher asks me what I would like to play with, so I choose hairdressing and go over to the toy mirror and pretend to put on some make-up. Afterwards, I go over to the dress-up area and choose a red dress to wear. I play Mommies and Babies with my friend. I put the red dress back on its hanger so I can pick a different outfit to wear. The teacher helps me to put on a new costume. I am dressed up as a witch now and I start cackling and using a wooden spoon as a wand. All the other children think I am funny pretending to be a witch. Zane plays magic with me.

I call one of my other friends over to play with me in the sensory area. We play Doctor and Patient and we take turns pretending to take each other's temperatures and perform surgery. When we are finished with this game, my friend and I role play about money. I find a purse and I fill it up with small blocks that I pretend are coins. I then go

over to the home area where I join a picnic with a few other children and one of the teachers. At tidy-up time, I help to tidy up all the toys and I sing along to the music. I eat my lunch and join in when the class starts talking about our trip to the farm the day before. I then go over to the book corner and look at some books with my friend. All the class then plays musical statues together. One of the tasks is to hop on one foot but I am not able to do it. A teacher holds my hand so that I can join in and I start hopping up and down with the other children.

A Day in the Setting for Ava

My name is Ava. I colour in my Father's Day art at the table with my friends. When I am finished I give the drawings to a teacher who praises me and tells me I can go get my snack. I find my bag on the hook which has my photograph displayed above it. A teacher helps me to open my snack and then I eat all my blueberries. I join in when the class talks about the day of the week and the weather. The teacher asks me to clean up my snack wrapper and to brush my teeth. I find my toothbrush and toothpaste in my cubby hole. I ask for help from a teacher to squeeze out the toothpaste onto my toothbrush.

When I am finished I go over to the costume rack to try on some clothes. I explore the kitchen area before moving around the room to look at all the different play areas. I choose to do a jigsaw puzzle. I work away at this by myself and when another child approaches, I ask them to leave me to play by myself. Another child sits across from me at the table and also plays independently. A teacher comes over when I am finished and we chat about the picture on the puzzle. Afterwards, I take the puzzle apart and do it again. The teacher reminds me to tidy the jigsaw away when I am finished. The teacher counts the pieces with me as I tidy them away. I then play with Lego alongside a few of the other children.

When I am finished, I join the picnic in the kitchen area. I give a spoon to one of the teachers and we pretend to eat and drink. The teacher and I smile at each other as we pretend to eat with the spoons. Another child offers me some pretend food. I help put the plates away during tidy-up time and dance around to the music, twirling one of

the AIM Dancing Ribbons about in the air. At lunchtime I join in when the class starts talking about what everybody is eating. I sing to myself while I finish my lunch. After lunch, I hop and jump around to the music with the other children during our game of musical statues.

Inclusive Culture. It is clear that all children are welcome and valued in the setting and that difference is acknowledged and celebrated. As the children circulated in the room, photographs and drawings of the children, their families and flags of their native countries were clearly displayed throughout (see Figure 30). Oona is observed playing with dolls which represent diverse ethnicities. The children's art work also decorates the walls, demonstrating that value is placed on children's individual creations.



Figure 30. Children's artwork depicts children's different family compositions

Children each have their own cubby hole and peg for their belongings (see Figure 31). Overall, these displays and individualised spaces can serve to promote a sense of belonging in the setting. The children were also contented – singing to themselves, talking and playing with their friends – and each child participated in all activities during the session.



Figure 31. Oona finds her bag underneath her photograph on the rack

There were high expectations for all children in the setting. During the session, teachers encouraged children to do things for themselves. Children poured their own water, tidied up their toys and washed up after themselves. The teachers scaffolded children's learning by providing them with low levels of assistance, allowing the children to complete tasks for themselves (e.g. partially opening a bottle of water; partially closing a schoolbag). Children in the setting were given certain responsibilities according to a rota, such as giving out the placemats and cups for lunch (see Figure 32). Respectful interactions were also observed during the session. Interactions between the teachers and the children were warm, responsive and cognitively stimulating. When Zane was told not to do something (e.g. touch other children without their consent), his teacher was calm and respectful.



Figure 32. Zane is given the task of distributing placemats for lunch. The wall behind Zane displays photographs of children in the setting

The environment also accommodated the needs of all children. The setting was clean and bright. All toys and materials that the children needed throughout the day were on low shelves which were easy to reach. There was a wide variety of toys and puzzles in the different play areas of the room. The toys, puzzles and books were congruent with children's individual interests. The different areas of the room including the kitchen area, sensory area and book corner accommodated the varying needs and interests of children during free play. It was clear that the setting was consistently seeking to mitigate the limited open space available in the setting and the lack of an outdoor area.

Inclusive Practice. The aspect of inclusive practice which was evident from the video observations pertained to the setting's approach to ensuring transitions were a positive experience for children. The video data illustrated that adult verbal directions were used during the day to facilitate transitions between various activities. This consisted of informing the children at ten, five and two-minute intervals that an activity was going to end and then counting down from ten seconds together as a class. Transitions were also eased by playing a familiar song.

Inclusive Pedagogy. Elements of inclusive pedagogy were also evidenced in the data. First, the play-based approach of the setting was apparent from the video observations. Children spent approximately half of the duration of the observation in free play during which time they were free to circulate in the room and choose with whom and with what they wanted to play. The freedom to self-select developmentally-appropriate activities was important. For instance, Ava took the opportunity to play alone doing a jigsaw (see Figure 33), which also provided the INCO with an opportunity for one-on-one time with her.

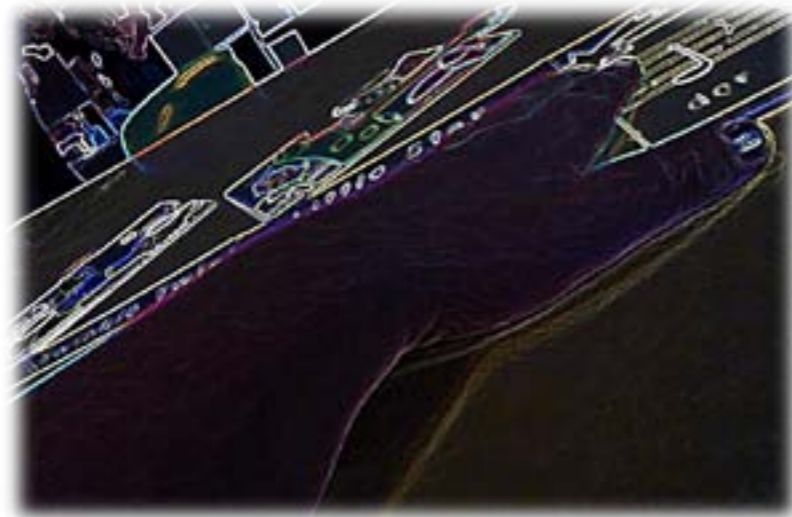


Figure 33. Ava spends some quiet time doing a jigsaw during free play

The learning needs of all children were considered in the setting. All children participated fully in each activity during the session. On the day of the observation, these activities included colouring, free play and dancing. There were spaces in the room where children could play quietly by themselves, engage in more boisterous play or imaginative play with their friends (see Figure 34). When one child found it difficult to hop up and down during the game of musical statues, a teacher held her hand so that she was able to take part. Teachers provided five/ten-minute prompts before an activity was due to end in order to make transitions easier for all children. There was also evidence of the AIM play resources being used.



Figure 34. Oona has a picnic with her friends in the home area

Setting 2

The second setting which took part in this strand of the research was a privately-owned sessional service for children aged between 2–5, located in the west of Ireland. The setting can accommodate up to 22 children and is a sole-provider service. According to the CSO 2019 area type classification, the location of this setting is in an independent urban town. One child in the setting was invited to wear an unobtrusive mini-camera attached to her clothing for approximately two hours during the session. The INCO also wore a camera during this session. Further, a short recording of an example of inclusive practice was made. Due to unforeseen circumstances, no semi-structured conversation between the LINC researcher and the child was conducted.

A Day in the Setting for Sophia

My name is Sophia. I am autistic and I have sensory processing differences. I explore the room to decide what I want to play with. I walk over to look at my photograph and name above my hook on the coat rack. I then go outside and I look at the leaves and touch the stones on the ground while babbling to myself. I decide to go back inside where I look at myself in the mirror. The teacher stays close by me as I move between the indoor and outdoor areas. I look at the books in the reading area before going back outside. The teacher tells another child that I like bubbles and they call me over to watch them blow some. The teacher then blows some bubbles and I try to catch them.

Next, I play with some animal toys and dolls inside while the other children play outside. On the wall beside me are photographs from a recent class trip. I start to play with the AIM Grimm's Rainbow stacking toy. The teacher names some of the colours of the rainbow and praises me when it is complete. I next choose a block shaped like a chicken and the teacher asks me what noise it makes. I say 'cluck cluck' and the teacher tells me that in the morning he says 'cock-a-doodle-do'. I go back outside babbling 'cock-a-doodle-do' to myself. When I go back inside I pick up a hobbyhorse and the teacher sings a song about horses to me.

The teacher shows me a 'first-and-then' schedule to let me know that it is snack time. Then the teacher brings my snack to me and shows me the snack card on a visual aid, the AIM 'My Day Fan'. I choose not to have my snack now. I sing a nursery rhyme to myself and continue moving freely around the room while the other children eat their snacks outside. I count the magnets on the fridge. I then look at a toy workbench. When the teacher tells me how to use it, I start hammering the nails. The teacher encourages another child to go inside and show me the musical instruments. The teacher joins us and tells me the names of the instruments and I repeat them back. The teacher then plays the keyboard and sings nursery rhymes to me while I take a rest and drink from my bottle.

The teacher takes me over to the mirror and we look at ourselves. The teacher sings to me and blows bubbles for me. The mirror is next to the reading circle where the children and teachers are doing circle time and talking about their feelings. The occupational therapist had advised my teacher that I should be encouraged to play close by during circle time. The teacher helps me to use an emotions fan to find the happy face when it is my turn to tell the class how I am feeling. I play on the AIM balance cushion in front of the mirror for the rest of circle time. Afterwards, I sing nursery rhymes and babble to myself as I move around the room exploring the different toys. Someone's dad comes to pick them up and I run over to say goodbye. When the music plays at tidy-up time, I take a teacher's hand and we start to dance together.

Inclusive Culture. There is evidence from the video observation that the setting strives towards an inclusive culture in a mindful and focused manner. Children are

welcome and valued in the setting. The INCO showed awareness of Sophia's individual interests and strengths. Child-level photographs and the names of the children are displayed on the walls. The children's art is also hung up throughout the room indicating that their creations are valued. An 'interest board' on the wall displays photos of all the children and lists their individual interests (see Figure 35). Sophia was happy moving about the setting as she pleased, choosing what to play with and singing and babbling to herself.



Figure 35. Children's interests and photographs are displayed throughout setting

There are high expectations for all children in the setting. Efforts are made to include all children in circle time. During the session Sophia was encouraged to take part in circle time and assisted by an emotions fan to do so. Interactions in the setting are also respectful. It was evident from the video data that interactions between adults and children were responsive and cognitively stimulating. The INCO ensured that they spent sufficient one-on-one time with Sophia during the session.

The settings' environment accommodates the needs of all children. The setting is bright, colourful and spacious, with direct access to the outdoors. Children were able to move freely throughout the room and between indoors and outdoors as they wished. Toys and materials were stored on low shelves and easily accessed by children. There

was a wide variety of toys and puzzles in the different play areas of the room. The video observation also captured elements of the setting's partnership with parents. The video data showed parents entering the setting at home time and talking informally with the INCO about their child's day.

Inclusive Practice. The element of inclusive practice which was evident from the video observations pertained to the setting's approach to ensuring transitions were a positive experience for children. There was evidence from the video data of the teacher using 'first-and-then' schedules to assist Sophia in transitioning from one activity to the next (see Figure 36).

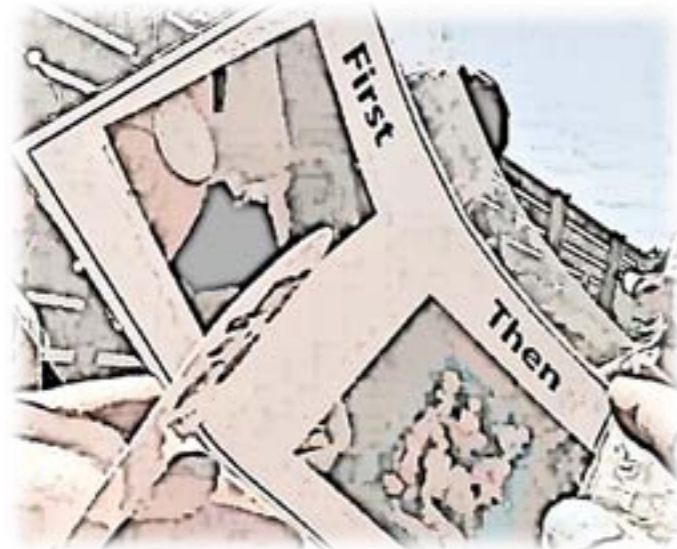


Figure 36. The INclusion CO-ordinator uses a 'first-and-then' card with Sophia

As Sophia circulated in the room, photographs on the walls could be seen which displayed the various primary schools that the children will be attending in the future (see Figure 37).



Figure 37. Child-level photographs depicting local primary schools

Inclusive Pedagogy. It was clear from the video observation that strategies for inclusion in the setting were in place to promote the participation of all children in learning. These strategies included 'first-and-then' photos of daily routines and encouraging inclusion during 'circle time'. The setting adopted a play-based approach and much of the session was spent in free play where children could choose their activities with the support of the teachers as necessary. Children's communication and interaction were also promoted throughout the session. There was evidence from the video data of the AIM materials being used in the setting (e.g. the My Day Fan, the Grimm's Rainbow, the Disc 'O' Sit and the massage kit; see Figure 38).



Figure 38. Sophia plays with the AIM Grimm's Rainbow

It was also clear that the setting took on board the child's views and preferences. In the video example, the children and teacher were engaged in circle time (see Figure 39). They sang a song that Sophia was fond of and used props that she was observed playing with throughout the day.



Figure 39. Sophia and her friends engaging in circle time

A Day in the Setting for Insar

My name is Insar and I am four years old. I am autistic. I did not like the feeling of the camera on my clothes so the AIM support teacher Mary wore it instead. I play with a Hula-Hoop outside. Mary encourages me to move my hips to help the Hula-Hoop stay up. She then helps me climb up the steps of the treehouse so I can go down the slide and we chat about how fast another child slid down. Mary helps us to take turns going down the slide. She names the colours of the rungs on the treehouse ladder in Irish and encourages me to climb up by myself. When I become impatient for my turn, she reminds me to stay calm. Mary suggests that I take a short break from playing and that we read my favourite book together.

We go into the staff room where it is quiet and read the book together. When Mary starts each sentence, I am able to finish it off. Later I tell the researcher that I like the story I read with Mary. After we finish the book, I choose another one to read together. The book is all about vehicles and I am able to name each different type. Mary suggests that we go back to play with everybody else, but I want to read another book first. I laugh and sing as we talk about the pictures in the book. When we are finished, Mary encourages me to tidy away the box of books and praises me for doing so.

Mary suggests that we do some Irish together while I eat my snack. I find the picture cards on the shelf and am able to tell her the colour of each card in Irish. When it is time to tidy up, Mary lets me know by singing the clean-up song, but I run outside instead of helping. Mary suggests that we go inside to do a puzzle together. We look at cards with different shapes displayed on them and I am able to name all the shapes I see. Next, Mary takes the Grimm's House and Rainbow down from a shelf to play with. I stack the different pieces and sing a song about the colours. After playing outside again, Mary suggests that it is time for another break and we go inside to play with the AIM Squigz. She then gives me the AIM therapy putty. The class goes outside for lunch and we sing songs together.

A Day in the Setting for Evan

My name is Evan and I am three years old. I play outside with a Hula-Hoop. I pretend that there is going to be a circus and practice for the show while singing to myself. I

Setting 3

The final setting included in this strand of the evaluation was a part-time, community-based service for children aged between 2–6, located in the east of Ireland. The setting can accommodate 34 children. According to the CSO 2019 area type classification, the location of this setting is classified as urban, belonging to the city. Three children in the setting were invited to record their experiences. A teacher in the setting (not the INCO) also wore a camera during this session in order to capture a broader overview of the interactions taking place. Semi-structured conversations between the LINC researcher and each child were conducted which were based around the video observations and the key principles of inclusive practice.

tell my friend that it is their turn to be in the circus now. The teacher shows me how to twirl the Hula-Hoop and claps when I show that I can do it really fast. I ask my friend Jacob to play with me. He is my best friend at playschool and he is also an explorer for the day. He tells me that he wants to play by himself today. When I get a bit upset, the teacher tells me that it is okay to play on your own if you want to. I ask some other friends to play and we start playing with the basketball. When I see Jacob, I follow him up the ladder and down the slide. When Jacob says he still wants to play by himself, the teacher tells me I should play with the other children and reminds me that I have to share my friends.

The teacher creates an obstacle course out of the Hula-Hoops and encourages me to put my feet inside the hoops. The other children cheer for me as I run around the course. When things get a little bit rough, the teacher tells me we can go around the obstacle course together and cheers for me. The teacher tells me to try jump from one hoop to the other and praises me when I show that I can do it. To make it harder, the teacher tells me to try hop on one leg. I tell my teacher I can jump like a kangaroo. The teacher asks me if I know where the kangaroo carries her baby and I say it's in a pouch. I hide under a toy box and the teacher laughs after finding me. The teacher adds more obstacles to the course and shows me how to get around them. Then the teacher gives us tubes that we pretend are trumpets and telescopes. Afterwards I go inside to choose a costume from the costume rack.

A Day in the Setting for Jacob

My name is Jacob and I am four years old. I play with my friends outside. Later I tell the researcher that my favourite thing to do in playschool is play outside and that I like coming to playschool. I run inside to see what the other children are doing and I join them singing the ABC song and pretend I am a teacher with my teacher's stick. Then we talk about the weather and do counting. I run outside with my stick and the teacher warns me to be careful. I give my teacher a big hug. I pretend there is lava on the ground and my friends and I have to get away from it by climbing up to the treehouse. Then we pretend we are zombies.

After, I go over to the teacher who is doing the news with some of my friends. I tell everyone my news when my teacher passes me the microphone. I tell them that I went shopping and to the beach. My teacher asks me lots of questions about my news like if we got the bus to the beach or drove in a car. I ask if I can be the news presenter next and I interview my friend. It starts raining so I sing a song to tell the rain to go away. I help tidy up the toys outside at tidy-up time. Before lunch we all take turns to wash our hands in the basin. I ask the teacher if there might be a shark in the basin. My teacher laughs and tells me no one put a shark in the basin today. While we are waiting for everyone to wash their hands, we practice our songs for graduation. Two of my friends give out our lunchboxes and then we eat our lunch and talk about the weather.

Inclusive Culture. It was evident from the video data that the setting was implementing elements of an inclusive culture. There are many different areas indoors and outdoors to accommodate the needs and interests of all the children in the setting. Inside there is a quiet corner, buddy bench, dress-up area and home corner (see Figure 40). Whilst many of the shelves and toys are easy to reach, some play materials such as jigsaw puzzles are kept on high shelves and children must ask an adult to get them down. The outdoor area has Hula-Hoops, slides, a tree house, building blocks, a basketball hoop and a home area. The children in the setting moved between the indoor and outdoor areas as they chose during the recorded observation.

All children are welcome and valued in the setting and difference is celebrated. In the setting, there are photos of the children and the staff alongside their names on the wall in addition to the flags of children's native countries and a family tree. Children's art is also displayed on the walls. Children were encouraged to share their news. Through these displays and activities, children's cultures, identities and strengths are acknowledged and valued in the setting.



Figure 40. The quiet area, dress-up rack and flags on the wall make children feel welcome and indicate consideration of children's individual needs and interests

A focus is placed on promoting respectful interactions in the setting. In the video observations, children were assisted to take turns, have good manners and respect personal boundaries. Friendships are nurtured with the presence of a 'Buddy Bench'. Interactions between children and staff were cognitively stimulating and warm. There were also high expectations for all children in the setting. Children were encouraged to master skills like climbing and jumping, first with assistance from the teacher and then on their own (see Figure 41).



Figure 41. Children in the setting enjoyed playing outside. This is the obstacle course that Evan was encouraged to jump around

Inclusive Practice. There was some evidence of the setting's approach to ensuring transitions are a positive experience for children. The AIM support teacher provided Insar with plenty of breaks and opportunities for 'calm time' (see Figure 42). They also sang the tidy-up song to signal to Insar that it was time to finish up their activity.



Figure 42. Insar takes a break to read his favourite book

All the children sang songs together before having lunch. The entrance to the indoor area has a family tree and photos of the local community which may assist children transitioning in and out of the setting on a daily basis. The staff in the setting coordinated with the AIM support teacher to support Insar in the setting.

Inclusive Pedagogy. Children's experiences are planned with their needs in mind and strategies are put in place to support all children's learning. AIM support has been availed of in the setting and many of the AIM resources were used throughout the period of the observation.

The setting operates a play-based programme. The video observations demonstrated a mixture of child-led play and adult-directed activities to suit the holistic development and needs of all children in the setting (see Figure 43).

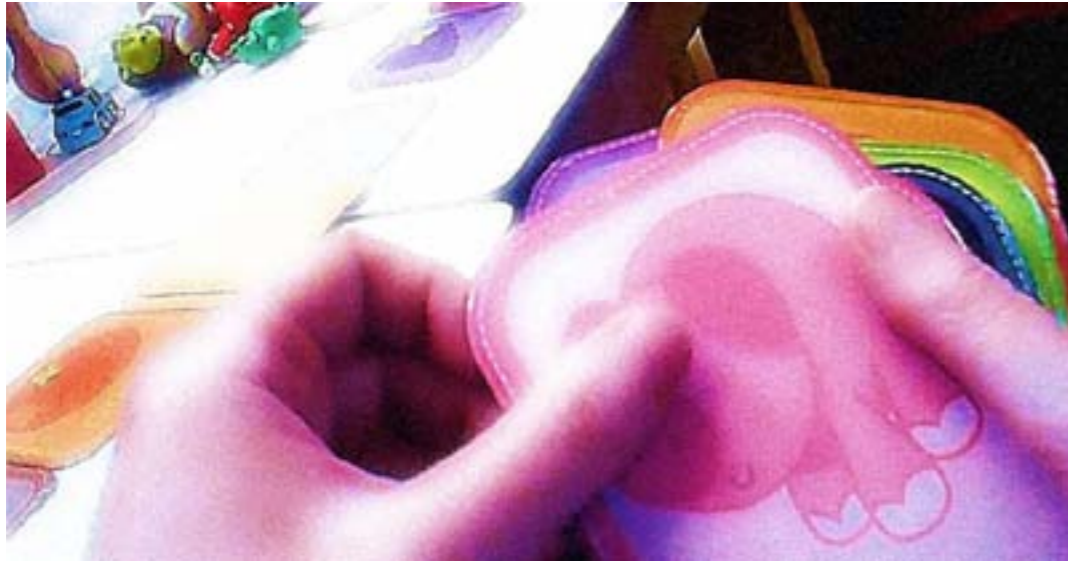


Figure 43. Insar practising colours in Irish with the AIM Support teacher

Summary

In view of the increasing focus on the voice of the child both nationally and globally and Ireland's commitments under international conventions⁴⁸, it is critical to elicit children's views of how they experience inclusion in ELC. The video observations of children across three settings in Ireland demonstrated how each child experienced and interacted with the ELC environment in diverse and unique ways. The play-based, child-led curricula along with the environment and materials in these settings accommodated children's various interests, abilities and strengths, supporting children's learning and development. Elements of the LINC Programme Competency Framework for Inclusion were evident across each setting and provided a basis from which to understand how children experience and perceive inclusion in their ELC environment.

Furthermore, key elements of inclusive practice identified in the literature were identified in the videos. The video observations provided insight into each child's interaction with their peers and early childhood teachers; the accessibility of resources in the environment; adaptations to the environment to meet each child's needs; the activities engaged in by the children in the environment; the preferred activities accessed by the children in the environment; and how the children experience play in the ELC environment.

Observations during this evaluation from a number of participants articulate a need for further evidence of the manner in which the LINC programme is impacting on early childhood teachers' knowledge(s), practices and values in leading inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in ELC settings. Capturing how the child is experiencing ELC through playful participatory approaches represents a powerful tool in identifying impact as ultimately how the child is experiencing ELC remains the litmus test for the impact of the LINC Programme.

⁴⁸ United Nations (1989) *Convention on the rights of the child*, New York, NY: United Nations, available: [Microsoft Word - Document1 \(ohchr.org\)](#); United Nations (2006) *Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities*, New York, NY: United Nations, available: https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/CTC/Ch_IV_15.pdf

There is a wide range of play materials both indoors and outdoors. Children are given the freedom to move about the indoors and outdoors and choose what they would like to play and with whom. Children's communication and interaction is promoted. The INCO was observed asking Jacob open-ended questions when he shared his news. The theme of the month is displayed on the wall. Children's emergent literacy and numeracy skills are developed through songs, counting, books and puzzles (see Figure 44).



Figure 44. Jacob pretends to be a teacher and does some counting

CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION AND FUTURE EVALUATION DIRECTIONS

The aim of the present multi-method research evaluation was to assess the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) Programme's progress during the period from 2018–2020 in achieving its aims of effecting qualitative shifts in early years teachers' knowledge(s), practices and values as they relate to leading inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in early learning and care (ELC) settings. The combined findings from the multiple strands of the present evaluation, framed by the adaptation of Guskey's approach to evaluating continuing professional development (CPD)⁴⁹, indicate that the LINC Programme content and processes meet the professional learning needs of its students; that students are gaining new knowledge and strategies from participating in the programme along with the skills to apply their new learning to practice; that the programme is having a positive effect on the inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy within settings and on the professionalisation of the ELC sector; and provide initial evidence of the programme's potential to impact positively children and families attending early years services.

Chapter 2 presented findings from LINC Programme evaluation surveys distributed to students on the LINC Programme. Findings pertaining to the 2018/19 and 2019/20 LINC Programme cohorts revealed high levels of satisfaction among students across each of the programme modules as well as with the programme overall. Satisfaction was high with regard to the programme content; how prepared graduates felt to lead inclusive culture, practice and pedagogy in their settings following the programme; and the model of programme delivery. Further to developing participants' competency to lead inclusion in their setting, findings also indicated that students experienced gains in their competency in using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and highlighted that many intended to progress to further education following the programme.

⁴⁹ Guskey, T.R. (2002a), 'Does it make a difference? Evaluating professional development', *Educational Leadership*, 59 (6), 45–51, available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1005&context=edp_facpub

Findings presented in Chapter 3 demonstrated that a cohort of Better Start Early Years Specialists (EYS) who undertook the LINC Programme in 2017/18 were overall satisfied with the programme and felt that participating had increased their understanding of the role and skills of the INclusion CO-ordinator (INCO). Findings from the employers' evaluations in 2018/19 and 2019/20 discussed in Chapter 4 provided initial insight into the LINC Programme's impact on the ELC setting. First, the findings demonstrated that the majority of those who undertook the programme in 2018/19 and 2019/20 were employers themselves. Second, most employers were satisfied with the programme and felt that their setting benefited from taking part.

Chapter 5 provided an insight based on data generated through internal and external LINC Programme quality assurance mechanisms. Quality control visits undertaken by the LINC Steering Group in 2018/19 provide a positive picture of the programme's content and delivery; the quality of participant engagement; and the quality of the venues in which the live sessions were conducted. External examination of the programme evaluated that the LINC Programme was fit for purpose and met the learning and professional needs of its students.

The perspectives of tutors on the LINC Programme were explored in Chapter 6. Tutors suggested that the LINC Programme was different from other CPD programmes and emphasised the centrality of their relationship with students to the programme. Tutors were very positive about the need for a programme like LINC; however, it was also acknowledged that the leadership aspect of the INCO role could be challenging. Tutors expressed the need for a 'buy-in' from services to ensure the graduate was supported and that the learning from the programme could be fully implemented in the setting.

The aim of Chapters 7 and 8 was to provide a macro-level perspective on the impact of the LINC Programme. Interviews with parents of children with additional needs, INCOs, and representatives from the DCEDIY and Tusla presented in Chapter 7 emphasised the value of the LINC Programme model of CPD and suggested that stakeholders had a good sense of the positive impact of the programme on students, the ELC setting and on children and families. Observations captured by children in settings with an appointed INCO detailed in Chapter 8 demonstrated how elements of

the key LINC Programme areas of competency – inclusive culture, inclusive practice and inclusive pedagogy – were implemented and experienced by children in the setting.

Implications for Future Policy and Practice Directions

Professional Learning Programmes

The findings of the present evaluation highlight the merit of disseminating the andragogical practices from the LINC Programme in the context of the development of blended learning across higher education in Ireland. Participants' satisfaction levels with the online recorded lessons, lesson activities, Moodle platform, face-to-face sessions and mentoring visits were very high in 2018/19 and 2019/20. Additionally, the role of the LINC tutor in delivering the programme as well as supporting and mentoring participants emerged as key to the students' experience of the programme.

Opportunities for peer learning and support which recognises participants' prior learning and experience were also highlighted. The programme's emphasis on reflective practice and how this enhances students' competence and practice with regard to inclusion emerged as a valuable skill which the programme sought to develop in its learners. The findings also suggest that the rigour with which academic regulations, quality processes and review mechanisms are being adhered to is impacting positively on students' experiences on the programme. A model with potential for further dissemination across the higher education landscape has evolved based on the governance structures in place at Mary Immaculate College (MIC) combined with the LINC Consortium Steering Group's contribution.

Supporting ELC Settings to Include All Children

The findings of the present evaluation provide insight into important challenges to be addressed in order to support INCOs effectively to lead inclusion in their settings, deepen their own professionalism and positively impact children and families attending ELC services. Research continues to highlight that inclusion is a shared

responsibility⁵⁰ and that all relationships in each child's environment impact on the child's learning and development and, together with each child's unique disposition and competencies, must be considered and understood in order to provide for each child's sense of belonging, engagement and learning.⁵¹ In this context, the following key considerations have emerged from an analysis of the data:

- Providing an opportunity for more than one staff member per ELC setting to participate in the LINC Programme would further benefit settings in adopting a whole-setting approach to inclusion.
- Building on the communication structures and strategies that have been established with setting managers will continue to ensure employers are sufficiently informed in relation to supporting the INCO better during their participation in the programme and in their role as INCOs.
- The interviews with key stakeholders emphasise the potential value of raising the profile of the INCO among parents and families of children attending ELC settings.
- The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is based on the principle of universalising access for all children. The historic focus of LINC on 'disability' stems from a period when there was a concern across government that children with 'disabilities' be provided with access to the free preschool scheme.⁵² Recalibrating the focus of LINC in any future iterations to support ELC settings

⁵⁰ O'Sullivan, L. and Ring, E. (2023) 'On the path to developing a high-quality inclusive preschool system in the Irish context: Outcomes from a systemic focus on structural and process quality dimensions', in Şenol, H. (ed.), *Recent perspectives on preschool education and care*, IntechOpen, DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.113764

⁵¹ Ring, E. (2021) 'Introduction: Looking towards a new era of leading education for all from the inside out: The potential of a bioecological lens in creating early childhood experiences where diversity becomes the norm', in Ring et al. *Leading inclusion from the inside out*, pp. 3–27; Hayes, N., O'Toole, L., Halpenny, A.M. (2022) *Introducing Bronfenbrenner: A guide for practitioners and students in early years education*, 2nd ed., London: Routledge; European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education. (2017b) *Inclusive early childhood education: New insights and tools – Final summary report* (M. Kyriazopoulou, P. Bartolo, E. Björck-Åkesson, C. Giné and F. Bellour, eds.), Odense: European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, pp. 10–11, available at: [IECE-Summary-ENelectronic \(european-agency.org\)](https://www.european-agency.org/summary-enelectronic)

⁵² Ring, E. (2024) *Special education in an independent Ireland 1922–2022: Insights from a journey through the century*, Trim: National Council for Special Education [forthcoming].

to provide opportunities for all children to participate equally in their early childhood experiences would contribute to the realisation of this principle of universalism.

- In view of the seven levels of the AIM, the findings suggest that it is timely to review each level and how the links between Level 3 and the other levels may be strengthened. Examples include consideration of research indicating the positive impact of a targeted system-wide approach to Therapeutic Interventions⁵³ in addition to interrogating what Inclusive Culture at Level 1 should be equated with; and supporting the strengthening of Expert Early Years Educational Advice and Support at Level 4 in addition to understanding the precise relationship between Levels 2, 5 and 7 with Level 3.

Future Evaluation Directions

The evaluation to date has focused predominantly on self-reported data, a rigorous analysis of which reveals consistent patterns which have been reported in the findings detailed in the previous chapters. The observational data collected through the 'Exploring and Telling'⁵⁴ methodology and internal/external quality control mechanisms further corroborate and support the self-reported data. In the next phase of evaluating the LINC Programme, a mixed-method approach is proposed that combines quantitative analyses with qualitative methods to substantiate or interrogate further the quantitative findings.⁵⁵

Data will be collected from six single case-study ELC settings through engaging in focus groups with parents; individual interviews with staff; child consultations using

playful participatory approaches and an exploration of artefacts in the setting.⁵⁶ Increasingly, young children's education and care is shared among parents, families and practitioners in a partnership approach to benefit the children. Whilst the present evaluation provided initial insight into parents' perspectives, this will be expanded in further detail in the next iteration of the evaluation. Interviews with INCOs and their colleagues will provide further insight into how the learning from LINC is evidenced in practice and contextualise the role of the INCO within AIM as a whole. Furthermore, in respect of the focus on learner voice both nationally and globally, it is critical to elicit children's views of how they experience inclusion in the early years.⁵⁷

Survey data will continue to be collected from LINC Programme participants in relation to their experiences of individual programme modules and their overall programme experience. The external and internal quality control mechanisms detailed in this evaluation will also continue to be adopted. Furthermore, there is a proposal to invite all past graduates of the LINC Programme to participate in a survey focused on evaluating the continued impact of the programme on their knowledge(s), practices and values vis-à-vis the LINC Programme Competency Framework. Level 5 of Guskey's Model for Evaluating Discrete Elements of a CPD Programme identifies 'Outcomes for Children' as the ultimate achievement of a professional learning programme. While due to the parameters of the evaluation in terms of both available time and resources, individual child-baselines were not collected in the context of this evaluation, it is suggested that the LINC Programme has the potential to translate into positive outcomes for children, provided the findings stemming from the range of data sources translate into practice in ELC settings. As noted in the previous chapter, playful participatory approaches that explore how children experience their ELC setting have the potential to contribute significantly to identifying the impact of the LINC programme on its intended beneficiaries, who are ultimately the children.

⁵⁶ Goldschmidt, P. and Congdon, A. (2018) 'Exploratory analysis of teacher artifacts as evidence of educator effectiveness implementation fidelity', *Journal of School Administration Research and Development*, 3(1), 6–18.

⁵⁷ Ring, E. (2018) Child voice: How, why, when? *Annual Inspectorate Conference*, February 27–28, Sheraton Hotel: Athlone; Ring, E. and O'Sullivan, L. (2018) *Exploring and telling*, Limerick: Mary Immaculate College; Ring, E., Harte, P. and Harmon, M. (2021) 'Making children's right to participate visible and children's voices distinct in the acoustic of early childhood education', in Ring, E., O'Sullivan, L., Ryan, M. and Daly, P. (eds.), *Leading inclusion from the inside out: A handbook for parents and early childhood teachers in early learning and care, primary and special school settings*, 31–60.

⁵³ Lynch, H., Ring, E., Boyle, B., Moore, A., O'Toole, C., O'Sullivan, L., Brophy, T., Frizelle, P., Horgan, D., and O'Sullivan, D. (2020) *Evaluation of early learning and care and in-school therapy support demonstration project*, Trim, National Council for Special Education, available at: <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Demo-project-evaluation-final-for-web-upload.pdf>

⁵⁴ Ring, E. O'Sullivan, L., O'Keefe, S., Ferris, F. and Wall, E. (2019) *An evaluation of the Teach Me As I Am early years programme*, Dublin: AsIAM, available at: <https://asiam.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/TeachMeAsIAM-booklet.pdf>

⁵⁵ Greene, J., Valerie, J., Caracelli, G. (1989) 'Toward a conceptual framework for mixed-method evaluation designs', *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 11, 255–274.

Summary

The findings of this report provide insight into the LINC Programme's positive impact on early childhood teachers' knowledge(s), practices and values vis-à-vis the LINC Programme Competency Framework (see Appendix B). These dimensions are discernible in relation to leading inclusion across the four broad and interrelated areas of working with children; working with families and communities; working with other professionals and institutions; and early childhood in the wider local, national and international context.

The positive impact and high quality of the LINC programme has recently been corroborated and affirmed in the End of Year Three Evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)⁵⁸. Overall, the present evaluation provides important data on the impact of the LINC Programme on students, ELC settings, the ELC sector as well as on children and families with regard to inclusion. However, the precarious employment status of LINC staff arising from requirement to re-tender for the programme on a cyclical basis presents as a serious concern. This precarity has implications for the sustainability of the programme in the longer term both in terms of retaining the extensive expertise of existing staff and a clear need to create a permanent professional learning organisation for the sector⁵⁹.

Finally, it is important to consider the findings of the present evaluation in light of established limitations of measuring the impact of professional learning programmes, an issue which was raised during the interviews with key stakeholders in Chapter 7. It is challenging and beyond the scope of the present report to isolate the influence of the LINC Programme controlling for factors such as previous professional learning in the area of inclusion, the resources of individual settings and the heterogeneous needs of children and families. Whilst much of the present data are self-reported, this is a key approach to evaluating professional learning which is bolstered by the triangulation of multiple sources. Critically, the present findings can be interpreted in the context of a

⁵⁸ Robinson, D., Gowers, S.J., Codina, G., Artess, J., Antonio Delgado Fuentes, M., Mycock, K., Qureshi, S., Shepherd, R., and Ni Luanaigh, I. (2024) *End-of-three-year evaluation of the Access and Inclusion Model*: Dublin: Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, available at: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/281416/efef74fb-04d6-4f8b-ba80-f7af48c6d8b1.pdf>

⁵⁹ See for example Oide Support Service for Teachers and School Leaders at <https://oide.ie/>

multi-method evaluation which includes surveys, semi-structured interviews and video observations which provide feedback from students, early years specialists, employers, LINC Programme tutors, external examiners, key stakeholders as well as parents and children.



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Appendix A: Award-Winning Programme

Education Awards

The annual Education Awards acknowledge and celebrate excellence in the third level education sector in Ireland. The variety of award categories are designed to recognise the achievements of providers and highlight key areas that impact upon student performance, including the development and integration of the best online learning experience for students, best student engagement and communications structure, and best marketing and/or communications team. Since the establishment of LINC, the programme has received four Education awards in total:

- *Best Online Learning Experience Award, 2017*
- *Student Engagement & Communications Award, 2019*
- *Best Online Learning Experience Award, 2020*
- *Best Marketing/Communications Team Award, 2020*

Star Awards

The STAR Awards are an annual awards initiative organised by the national adult learning organisation, AONTAS, to recognise and celebrate the work of adult learning initiatives in Ireland. The STAR Awards are judged by an independent judging panel comprising of adult learners, tutors and adult learning experts. Nominees include adult learning initiatives that have demonstrated an innovative approach to adult learning, promote inclusion of all adult learners and are recognised for their positive impact on society. The LINC Programme has been shortlisted for the *Adult Learning Initiatives that Promote Social Inclusion Award* on a number of occasions and has been the recipient of one Star Award to date.

- *Highly Commended Award for Social Inclusion, 2021*

Jennifer Burke Award

The annual Irish Learning Technology Association's *Jennifer Burke Award for Innovation in Teaching and Learning* is awarded in memory of Jennifer Burke, a highly-regarded member of the Irish Learning Technology community. The award recognises and celebrates innovative practice in Irish Teaching and Learning. The LINC Programme was the recipient of this award in 2018.

- *Jennifer Burke Award for Innovation in Teaching and Learning, 2018*

Appendix B. Competency Framework for Inclusion in Early Learning and Care

A. An inclusive culture

1	All children are welcome
2	All children are valued
3	A focus is placed on promoting respectful interactions
4	There are high expectations for all children
5	Partnership with parents/carers is actively promoted
6	Difference is acknowledged and celebrated
7	The environment accommodates the needs of all children
8	All policies are inclusive policies

B. An inclusive practice

1	Transitioning to and from the setting is a positive experience for children, families and staff
2	Support for children with additional needs is coordinated
3	Staff members are encouraged to avail of continuing professional development opportunities
4	All staff are aware of their roles and responsibilities in relation to the promotion of inclusive practice
5	The expertise of staff is acknowledged and utilised

C. An inclusive pedagogy

1	Children's experiences are planned with the needs of all children in mind
2	Strategies are in place to promote the participation of all children in learning
3	A range of appropriate pedagogical approaches is used to support the holistic development of all children
4	Play and playful learning are key features of practice for all children
5	All children's communication and interaction are promoted
6	All children's views are valued and responded to
7	Early identification of children who require additional support is central to practice
8	A variety of approaches to observation, recording and assessment is in place
9	Early years educators plan, implement and evaluate children's learning in partnership with children, parents/carers and relevant others
10	Positive relationships are understood and nurtured
11	Children's specific assessed needs are understood as 'signposts' that support children's learning and development
12	External assistance is elicited where required to support the setting to meet children's additional needs

Appendix C. Sample Module Evaluation Survey

LINC 2019/20 - Module 2 - Child Development - Evaluation

The LINC team is interested in hearing about your experience of the modules on the LINC Programme through a short survey, entitled 'Module 2 - Child Development Evaluation', which contains some open and closed questions. Your views will help to inform how the LINC programme is delivered in the future with a view to enhancing both policy and practice in including children with additional needs in the early years. The data may also be used to inform research and presentations. Data collected for the research will be retained only for the duration of the project plus an additional three years.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and confidential and no personal information that could identify you will be gathered as part of this. Participation in the survey is not compulsory, nor is participation in the study linked in any way to your achievement on the LINC programme. The survey should take no more than 5 minutes to complete and you may also exit the survey at any time during the process.

If you have any concerns or require further information in relation to the survey, please do not hesitate to contact Mary at linc@mic.u.ie or at the following number: 061-204546. Alternatively, if you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact: MIREC Administrator, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick on 061-204000 or mirec@mic.u.ie.

Your willingness to participate in this research is greatly appreciated.

If you wish to participate in the research, please continue below, otherwise please close the page now.

* 1. I am willing to participate in the research study entitled 'A participant evaluation of the Leadership for INclusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme' being conducted by Professor Emer Ring. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any presentations/ publications that arise from this project. I understand that data collected for the research will be retained only for the duration of the project plus an additional three years.

Please tick here to confirm your agreement

LINC 2019/20 - Module 2 - Child Development - Evaluation

* 2. Having completed the Child Development module, how do you feel about the module overall?

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
★	★	★	★	★

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

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Content	○	○	○	○	○
Difficulty	○	○	○	○	○
Resources (such as library access, additional readings, videos, etc)	○	○	○	○	○
Assessment	○	○	○	○	○
Time-frame	○	○	○	○	○
Application to Practice	○	○	○	○	○
Tutor Support	○	○	○	○	○

* 4. Having completed the Child Development module, how well do you feel that the module has prepared you to lead the following areas?

	Very Poor	Poor	Neutral	Well	Very Well
An inclusive culture, where children are welcomed and valued, as evident in the preschool environment, the settings' policies, and partnership with parents.	○	○	○	○	○
Inclusive practice where transitions are supported and the expertise of the early years team is utilized and enhanced by training opportunities.	○	○	○	○	○
Inclusive pedagogy whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner, and are documented effectively to identify needs?	○	○	○	○	○

Appendix D. Participants' Programme Evaluation Survey

* 5. Having completed the face-to-face classroom sessions for Child Development, please let us know your satisfaction about the following:

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Venue Location / Ease of Access	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Parking	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Room Layout, Temperature & Noise Levels	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tea/Coffee Facilities at Breaks	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Lunch Options Nearby	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Content & Delivery	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

* 6. In which location are you completing the LINC Programme?

* 7. What is your highest qualification level to date?

8. Please feel free to add any further comments, if you wish:

LINC 2019/2020 - Module 6 & Overall Programme Evaluation

* 9. Having completed the programme, how do you feel about the programme overall?

Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please comment briefly on why you feel this way about the programme, including any suggestions you feel might further improve this programme:

* 10. In one sentence, what did you take from the LINC Programme?

* 11. Having completed the programme, how well do you feel that the programme has prepared you to lead the following areas?

	Very Poor	Poor	Neutral	Well	Very Well
An inclusive culture, where children are welcomed and valued, as evident in the preschool environment, the settings' policies, and partnership with parents.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive practice where transitions are supported and the expertise of the early years team is utilised and enhanced by training opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive pedagogy whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner, and are documented effectively to identify needs?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please comment briefly on your experience, including any suggestions you feel might further contribute to your ability to lead these areas in your setting

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

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied
Content	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Difficulty	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Resources (such as library access, additional readings, videos, etc.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Time frame	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Application to Practice	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Tutor Support	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please comment briefly on your experience, including any suggestions you feel might further improve the programme:

* 13. During this programme, how useful did you find the following components of the programme?

	Not Very Useful	Not Useful	Neutral	Useful	Very Useful
Online Recorded Lessons	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Activities (e.g. forum posts)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Weekly Chats	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Linc Landing Page on Moodle	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Orientation Day	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Face-to-face Classroom sessions	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Mentoring Visit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please let us know any comments you may have which may have on these aspects of the programme delivery.

* 14. Please let us know how you feel about the following LINC Supports (use N/A if you did not use the support during the year)

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N/A
My Tutor	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
LINC Office Support Team	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
ICT Support Team	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Blended Learning Unit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Other MIC College Services (Please let us know in the comments box which services you are referring to)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Let us know any comments you wish to make on the supports available to you

* 15. Prior to the LINC Programme, had you experienced Blended (or Online) Learning?

* 16. Prior to involvement in this programme, rate your competence in terms of using technology for educational purposes

Not at all competent Not competent Neutral Competent Very Competent

* 17. Having completed the LINC Programme, rate your competence in terms of using technology for educational purposes

Not at all competent Not competent Neutral Competent Very Competent

Please feel free to add any comments about your experience of the blended learning / technology aspect of the programme.

18. Have you any comments on the look, feel, aesthetics, audio or navigability of the Moodle Pages or online lessons which may help us improve them for the future?

Appendix E: Supplemental Data

Chapter 2

19. List three positive aspects of the LINC Programme

Positive Aspect 1:

Positive Aspect 2:

Positive Aspect 3:

20. List three things you would change about the LINC Programme

Change 1:

Change 2:

Change 3:

21. In your role as an Inclusion Coordinator (INCO), what supports do you feel would benefit you most in the future?

22. After completing the LINC Programme do you intend on progressing on to do another course?

Yes
 No

If yes, please specify the programme/level of the programme you attend to apply for/complete

23. Did you encounter any issues accessing the online lessons/activities from your device (e.g. android phone, etc.)?

Yes
 No

If yes please specify the make/model of the device you were using

24. Please feel free to add any further comments if you wish (in particular if you wish to comment on any individual module as well as the overall programme):

25. If you would like to be contacted to participate in further evaluative studies on the LINC Programme please provide your email address below

Table 15. Satisfaction with aspects of modules 1–6 in 2018/19 (% Satisfied/Very satisfied)

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Content	90.09%	91.54%	91.51%	95.91%	95.72%	90.56%
Difficulty	75.08%	70.89%	75.48%	82.45%	83.22%	78.08%
Resources	83.57%	81.69%	85.84%	91.23%	87.14%	80.12%
Assessment	79.32%	81.22%	78.30%	92.98%	87.86%	82.59%
Time frame	75.36%	76.52%	80.66%	94.74%	88.22%	77.08%
Application to practice	88.95%	87.32%	90.09%	95.32%	93.21%	91.39%
Tutor support	93.21%	93.43%	95.28%	97.08%	97.86%	95.85%

Table 16. Satisfaction with face-to-face sessions 2018/19 (Satisfied/Very satisfied)

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Content & delivery	86.97%	92.96%	92.45%	98.25%	95.71%	92.90%
Lunch options nearby	60.34%	62.91%	66.03%	65.50%	59.64%	64.07%
Tea/Coffee facilities	81.87%	80.28%	85.85%	85.38%	83.93%	87.50%
Room layout, temperature & noise	74.22%	76.99%	75.47%	81.29%	79.29%	81.60%
Parking	78.75%	83.10%	81.13%	87.13%	84.64%	85.97%
Venue location/Ease of access	81.87%	87.32%	79.15%	91.23%	87.14%	86.98%

Table 17. % Satisfied/Very satisfied with aspects of modules 1–6 in 2019/20

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Content	95.16%	90.17%	83.39%	93.04%	91.02%	94.97%
Difficulty	72.47%	68.86%	69.61%	82.28%	74.36%	77.14%
Resources	86.34%	84.15%	85.52%	86.71%	85.90%	79.89%
Assessment	87.01%	75.41%	80.57%	89.87%	85.25%	86.44%
Time frame	85.90%	75.96%	82.69%	93.68%	89.74%	87.64%
Application to practice	95.37%	84.69%	87.28%	90.51%	86.54%	89.89%
Tutor support	97.58%	97.27%	96.82%	95.57%	96.16%	94.41%

Table 18. Satisfaction with face-to-face sessions 2019/20 (Satisfied/Very satisfied)

	M1	M2	M3	M4
Content & delivery	96.04%	93.44%	94.34%	94.94%
Lunch options nearby	71.37%	69.4%	62.54%	65.19%
Tea/Coffee facilities	85.69%	83.61%	79.15%	82.91%
Room layout, temperature & noise levels	75.33%	76.5%	71.02%	85.44%
Parking	76.22%	79.24%	82.68%	87.34%
Venue location/Ease of access	87.67%	92.9%	84.10%	89.88%

Table 19. Participants' preparedness to lead LINC Programme areas of competency across modules 1–6 in 2018/19 (Well/Very well prepared)

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Inclusive culture	93.2%	93.9%	96.2%	98.8%	97.5%	95.3%
Inclusive practice	92.6%	93.0%	96.2%	96.5%	98.2%	96.5%
Inclusive pedagogy	91.8%	93.0%	94.8%	95.9%	96.8%	97.1%

Table 20. Participants' preparedness to lead LINC Programme areas of competency across modules 1–6 in 2019/20 (Well/Very well prepared)

	M1	M2	M3	M4	M5	M6
Inclusive culture	96.5%	91.8%	94.4%	95.6%	93.0%	96.7%
Inclusive practice	96.3%	91.3%	92.9%	98.1%	89.8%	97.2%
Inclusive pedagogy	96.3%	89.6%	92.9%	97.5%	93.0%	97.2%

Chapter 3

Table 21. Participant satisfaction with aspects of LINC Programme (Better Start EYS)

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Content	0%	0%	25%	55%	20%
Delivery	0%	0%	40%	45%	15%
Resources	0%	0%	30%	60%	10%
Assessment	0%	5%	20%	60%	15%
Time frame	0%	10%	15%	45%	30%
Application to practice	0%	0%	20%	55%	25%
Tutor support	0%	0%	5%	25%	70%

Table 22. Satisfaction with andragogy-related aspects of LINC (Better Start EYS)

	Useful/Very useful
Online recorded sessions	85%
Activities (e.g., forum posts)	55%
Weekly tutorials	35%
LINC landing page on Moodle	65%
Orientation day	85%
Face-to-face classroom sessions	85%
Mentoring visit	75%

Chapter 5

Table 23. Locations and venues of face-to-face sessions 2018/2019

Location	Venue
Sligo/Donegal	Glass House Hotel, Sligo
Dublin City	Marino Institute of Technology
Dublin South	Talbot Hotel, Stillorgan
Dublin West	Carlton Hotel, Blanchardstown
Louth	The D Hotel, Drogheda
Wexford	Amber Springs Hotel, Gorey
Offaly	Tullamore Court Hotel
Tipperary	Hotel Minella, Clonmel
Cork	Riverside Park Hotel, Macroom

Appendix F. Employers' Evaluation Survey

LINC 2019/20 Programme Evaluation - Employer

The LINC team is interested in hearing about your experience of the LINC Programme through a short survey, entitled 'An employer evaluation of the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme', which contains some open and closed questions. Your views will help to inform how the LINC programme is delivered in the future with a view to enhancing both policy and practice in the inclusion of children with additional needs in the early years. The data may also be used to inform research and presentations. Data collected for the research will be retained only for the duration of the project plus an additional three years.

Your participation in this survey is voluntary and confidential and no personal information that could identify you will be gathered as part of this. Participation in the survey is not compulsory. The survey should take no more than 10 minutes to complete and you may also exit the survey at any time during the process.

If you have any concerns or require further information in relation to the survey, please do not hesitate to contact Sarah, the Linc Researcher at linc@mic.ul.ie or at the following number: 061-204545. Alternatively, if you have concerns about this study and wish to contact someone independent, you may contact MIREC Administrator, Maynooth College, Limerick on 061-204950 or mirec@mic.ul.ie.

Your willingness to participate in this research is greatly appreciated.

If you wish to participate in the research, please continue below, otherwise please close the page now.

* 1. I am willing to participate in the research study entitled 'An employer evaluation of the Leadership for INClusion in the Early Years (LINC) programme' being conducted by the LINC Consortium. I have been given sufficient information about the project and I understand the nature of the research project. I am satisfied that the data can be used in anonymous form in any presentations/ publications that arise from this project. I understand that data collected for the research will be retained only for the duration of the project plus an additional three years.

Please tick here to confirm your agreement

LINC 2019/20 Programme Evaluation - Employer

2. Who undertook the LINC Programme at your setting?

- Me (Manager)
- Me (Employee)
- Manager (not me)
- Employee (not me)

* 3. From an employer's perspective, how do you feel about the programme overall?

Very Dissatisfied Dissatisfied Neutral Satisfied Very Satisfied Unsure

★ ★ ★ ★ ★ ○

Please comment briefly on why you feel this way about the programme, including any suggestions you feel might further improve this programme:

4. From an employer's perspective, do you feel you were given sufficient information about the LINC programme?

- Yes, I had sufficient information
- No, I would have liked additional information

If you answered no, what would you have liked further information on?

* 5. How well did your setting benefit from the LINC Programme?

Please let us know why you chose this option, giving examples if relevant:

* 6. Since the LINC student has now completed the programme, how well do you feel that the programme has prepared him/her to lead the following areas?

	Very Poor	Poor	Neutral	Well	Very Well	Unsure
An inclusive culture, where children are welcomed and valued, as evident in the preschool environment, the settings' policies, and partnership with parents.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive practice where transitions are supported and the expertise of the early years team is utilised and enhanced by training opportunities.	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Inclusive pedagogy whereby learning experiences are planned to meet the needs of all children, and strategies are implemented to support learning in a playful manner, and are documented effectively to identify needs?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

7. From an employer's perspective, please comment briefly on your experience of the students' participation in the programme, including any suggestions you feel might further contribute to the student's ability to lead these areas in your setting.

(If you completed the programme yourself please answer N/A for non applicable and go to Q.8)

8. If you yourself participated in the programme, please comment briefly on your own experience, including any suggestions you feel might further contribute to your ability to lead these areas in your setting.

(If someone other than you completed this programme please answer N/A for non applicable and answer Q7.)

* 9. How well is the learning from the LINC Programme being shared within your setting?

- Very Poor Poor Neutral Well Very Well

We would be grateful if you would let us know the ways in which this learning is shared in your setting, or how it might be shared more effectively in settings.

* 10. As you may be aware, we carried out a mentoring visit with the LINC student while they were at work. How did you feel about the following aspects?

(If the mentor visit was conducted via phone/webinar due to Covid restrictions please select N/A for all aspects)

	Very Dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Neutral	Satisfied	Very Satisfied	N/A
Sufficient Notice from the LINC student that the visit was happening	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I understood what the visit entailed	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Suitability of the agreed time for the visit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Disruption to your service during the visit	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Please free to comment, if you wish, on the mentoring visit and process:

* 11. As the LINC student has now completed the LINC Programme, do you intend to appoint them as an Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) within your setting?

- Yes No (They are no longer employed in my setting) No (Other Reason)

If No (other reason), please explain why not?

12. The appointment of an INCO comes with additional capitation. Please select from the below options what this capitation may be used for. Note: you can select multiple options if more than one is relevant, or none if you do not intend to use capitation for any of the below stated purposes.

- Increased salary for the INCO
 Increased salary for others
 Expenditure on new resources/material/lab/equipment
 Contribution to overheads/running costs
 Other (please give any relevant examples)

13. As an employer, what supports do you feel will benefit your Inclusion Coordinator (INCO) in the future?

* 14. In which location did the LINC student complete the LINC Programme?

* 15. What is the LINC student's highest qualification level to date?

16. Please feel free to add any further comments if you wish:

Appendix G: External Examination of LINC Programme 2018/19 and 2019/20

External Examination Findings 2018/19

The external examiners visited the MIC campus on 02/10/19. The agenda for the visit included:

- Programme overview presented by the Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies and the Dean of Education
- Meeting with the Chief Executive Officer of Early Childhood Ireland/member of LINC Steering Group on sectoral context and partnership with LINC
- Presentation of programme evaluation by LINC researcher
- Meeting with LINC tutors
- Presentation of findings to programme team

Commendations

- Range of assessment techniques is well-balanced and supports needs of students.
- Grading is standardised across programme centres.
- Impressed by high level of feedback to students given the large cohort.
- Programme content is effective and relevant and targets the professional development requirements of students. Learning materials are exemplary.
- The programme is an important platform for ensuring all children are benefiting from high-quality learning experiences in the ELC environment.
- Impressed by LINC team's continual commitment to improve and update the programme in light of feedback from external examiners and students.
- The programme completion rate is high and graduates are enthusiastic and competent.
- The Communications and Marketing team has effectively raised the profile of the programme which is reflected in a rise in applications to the programme.
- The programme is an 'incredible success story' and has been awarded and shortlisted for a number of awards.

Recommendations

- Suggested minor changes to individual units/modules of the programme.
- Consider fluctuations in rates of attendance and participation across the academic year.
- Consider sharing participant satisfaction findings from previous evaluations at Orientation in order to ease concerns regarding the time frame and difficulty of the programme.
- Consider how reframing weekly tutorials as moderated forum chats might affect participant engagement.
- Consider investigating the clarity of the programme's audio content.
- Suggested approaches to conducting future surveys, case studies and parent interviews as part of programme evaluation.
- Consider the programme's impact on graduates' participation in further education.
- Consider ways in which the programme can be future-proofed and how a similar programme may be developed in conjunction with stakeholders.

External Examination Findings 2019/20

The meeting with the external examiners in 2019/20 took place online due to Covid-19 restrictions. The meeting took place on 14/10/20 and was conducted via Microsoft Teams. The agenda for the visit included:

- Programme overview presented by the Interim National Programme Director.
- Meeting with the Head of Department of Reflective Pedagogy and Early Childhood Studies and the Dean of Education.
- Meeting with the CEO of Early Childhood Ireland/member of LINC Steering Group on sectoral context and partnership with LINC.
- Overview of evaluation studies presented by Interim National Programme Director.
- LINC research study presented by lecturer in Early Childhood Care and Education.
- Meeting with LINC tutors.
- Presentation of findings to programme team.

Commendations

- The programme provides a comprehensive set of learning experiences which are tailored to the professional needs of students.
- The course’s learning outcomes are impressive and have continued to improve over the four years from an already high baseline.
- Course assessment and feedback to students are excellent and detailed rubrics ensure standardisation of grading across centres.
- The LINC team has implemented the majority of recommendations to date.
- The high quality of the programme is evidenced in the awards it has won as well as the fact that funding has been granted to run the programme for an additional three years.
- The LINC CPD programme which is being developed will consolidate LINC graduates’ learning and support application to practice.

Recommendations

- Consider how to mitigate the risks to the learning integrity and quality of the course incurred by compacting the programme roll-out to six months in 2020/21.
- Consider how programme completion rates may be affected by an incoming cohort which likely includes students from settings who have avoided taking part in the programme thus far.
- Consider specifying the focus and content of the weekly tutorials in advance to increase student attendance and engagement.
- Consider if access to course content could be given to graduates.
- Give recognition to the constraints facing students with regard to implementing best practice in their setting due to varying levels of authority to do so.
- Consider placing less emphasis on adherence to the Harvard referencing system for assignments.
- Consider how the LINC CPD programme will be integrated into the core LINC Programme, particularly in relation to the role of tutors.

Appendix H. Semi-Structured Tutor Interview Schedule

Respondent profile
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How long have you worked as a tutor on the LINC Programme? • Can you tell me about your role as a LINC Programme tutor?
The impact of LINC on the early learning and care sector
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think LINC fits within the wider context of supports for children with additional needs? • Do you think LINC is needed? <p>If ‘Yes’, why do you believe LINC is needed? If ‘No’, why do you believe LINC is not needed?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your experience, has LINC had an impact on the competency of early years educators to include children with additional needs in early years services since its introduction? <p>If ‘Yes’ – how would you describe this impact? If ‘No’ – why do you believe LINC has had no impact?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your experience, has LINC had an impact on the professionalisation of the early years sector since its introduction? <p>If ‘Yes’ – how would you describe this impact? If ‘No’ – why do you believe LINC has had no impact?</p>
The impact on the inclusion of children with additional needs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In your experience, has LINC had an impact on the inclusion of children with additional needs in early years services since its introduction? <p>If ‘Yes’ – how would you describe this impact? If ‘No’ – why do you believe LINC has had no/little impact? Do you have any specific examples?</p>
The impact of LINC on the students who participated in the programme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you think LINC has impacted on the students who participated in the programme? (Prompt – confidence as practitioners, confidence as learners, wellbeing, understanding of inclusion) • In your opinion, how well has the LINC Programme prepared graduates to lead in inclusive culture? • In your opinion, how well has the LINC Programme prepared graduates to lead in inclusive practice? • In your opinion, how well has the LINC Programme prepared graduates to lead in inclusive pedagogy? <p>Any specific examples?</p>
Conclusion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there any other aspect of your experience in relation to the LINC Programme that you think is important and that has not been addressed in this interview?

Appendix I. Semi-Structured INCO Interview Schedule

<p>Genesis of decision to apply for the LINC Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What prompted you to apply for the LINC Programme?
<p>Initial professional education and continuing professional learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell me about your initial professional education experience to date. • Were there any particular elements of your initial professional education that you think equipped you to meet the learning and teaching needs of children with additional needs in the early years? • What types of continuing professional learning programmes have you previously attended? • What experiences prepared you most for including children with additional needs in your setting? • Why do you think these experiences were particularly beneficial or not in enabling you to do your work?
<p>Concept of early years education for children with additional needs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that providing for children with additional needs in the early years is very different from providing for children who do not have additional needs? • From your experience, what do you think are the critical elements of appropriate provision for children with additional needs in the early years?
<p>Experience of LINC Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you think that the LINC Programme prepared you to provide for children with additional needs in your early years setting? • Tell me how you believe the programme prepared you/did not prepare you to provide for children with additional needs in your setting? • Do you believe that participating in the LINC Programme impacted positively on your own motivation? • How well has the LINC Programme prepared you for leading in inclusive culture in your setting? • How well has the LINC Programme prepared you for leading in inclusive practice in your setting? • How well has the LINC Programme prepared you for leading in inclusive pedagogy in your setting? • If so, can you identify specific ways in which the LINC Programme impacted positively on your own motivation?
<p>Pedagogy and assessment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What specific approaches do you find useful in providing for children with additional needs in the early years? • What prompts you to select a particular approach? • What approaches do you find are most effective for children with additional needs in your setting? • What teaching approaches do you find are least effective for children with additional needs in your setting? • What methods of assessment do you use to capture the child's attainments?

<p>Parental involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are parents/carers involved in their children's education programmes? • Are there particular structures in place that facilitate parental involvement?
<p>Support structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you encounter a problem in meeting the needs of children with additional needs, who do you consult initially? • What kind of additional support structures do you have access to in order to meet the needs of children with additional needs?
<p>Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is there any other aspect of your experience of providing for children with additional needs that you think is important and that has not been addressed in this interview?

Appendix J. Semi-Structured Parent Interview Schedule

<p>Enrolment in preschool</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When was your child first enrolled in this preschool?
<p>Satisfaction with educational provision</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How satisfied are you that the education provision made in this preschool setting meets the assessed needs of your child? How satisfied are you that the curriculum of this preschool meets the assessed needs of your child?
<p>Support structures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> When you encounter a problem in meeting the needs of your child, who do you consult initially? Does your setting have a designated INCO (INclusion CO-ordinator)? Do you have access to additional support structures to meet the needs of your child?
<p>Parental involvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How involved are you in your child’s education programmes? Are there particular structures in place that provide for your involvement?
<p>Transitions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are there particular strategies in place during key-transition periods for your child (e.g., transitioning to and from preschool, between activities, etc.)? Can you elaborate on these strategies?
<p>Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there any other aspect of your experience that you think is important and that has not been addressed in this interview?

Appendix K. Semi-Structured Key Informant Interview Schedule

<p>Respondent profile</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Organisation, job title Can you tell me about your organisation? Can you tell me about your role in the organisation? Specifically, could you tell me how your role relates to the early childhood sector and the inclusion of children with additional needs in the early years?
<p>Involvement with LINC</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do you think that LINC fits within the wider context of supports for children with additional needs? Can you tell me how your organisation relates to LINC? Does your role require you to work with graduates of the LINC Programme and if so, in what capacity? Do you think LINC is needed? If ‘Yes’, tell me why you believe LINC is needed. If ‘No’, tell me why you believe LINC is not needed. Do you think LINC is geographically accessible for all early years educators in Ireland?
<p>Experience of LINC Programme</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> In your experience, has LINC had an impact on the inclusion of children with additional needs in early years services since its introduction? If ‘Yes’ – how would you describe this impact? If ‘No’ – why do you believe LINC has had no impact? In your experience, has LINC had an impact on the competency of early years educators to include children with additional needs in early years services since its introduction? If ‘Yes’ – how would you describe this impact? If ‘No’ – why do you believe LINC has had no impact? In your experience, has LINC had an impact on the professionalisation of the early years sector since its introduction? If ‘Yes’ – how would you describe this impact? If ‘No’ – why do you believe LINC has had no impact? In your opinion, how well has the LINC Programme prepared graduates for leading in inclusive culture? In your opinion, how well has the LINC Programme prepared for leading in inclusive practice? In your opinion, how well has the LINC Programme prepared graduates for leading in inclusive pedagogy? Any specific examples?
<p>Conclusion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Is there any other aspect of your experience in relation to the LINC Programme that you think is important and that has not been addressed in this interview?

Appendix L: Semi-Structured Child Interview Themes

Themes to be discussed:

- The child's interaction with his/her peers
- The child's interaction with his/her early childhood teacher
- Accessibility of resources in the environment
- Adaptation of the environment to meet the child's needs
- Activities engaged in by the child in the environment
- Preferred activities accessed by the child in the environment
- How the child experiences play in the environment

Initially, the researcher will talk with the child about the pictures that have been taken and have a general discussion. Using an adapted Talking Mats methodology, the child will be asked to select the photographs related to the themes above and the researcher will ask the child to tell her what is happening in the photographs, using the following cues:

- Tell me what is happening in the photograph with your friends?
- Tell me what you are doing with your teacher in the photograph?
- What do you do with those lovely toys?
- Is it easy to move around and do what you like in your preschool?
- Talk to me about all the things you do every day when you are here?
- Do you like to play?
- What do you like playing with best?
- Do you play with your friends every day?

Appendix M: LINC Programme Team

The development, implementation and delivery of the LINC Programme is undertaken by a host of dedicated personnel with expertise in programme design and management, adult and further education, blended learning, inclusion, and early years education and care. The programme content was developed by a range of academics and experts in the fields of early childhood, inclusive education, and leadership.

Further to the members of staff and contributors listed below, the implementation and delivery of the LINC Programme has been supported by part-time Assistant Tutors who assist with the delivery of the Saturday classes and mentoring calls, a number of individuals on temporary contracts, and a range of staff across the LINC Consortium members, including the Learning Enhancement and Academic Development Centre and ICT Services at MIC. Whilst it is not possible to name all in this appendix, the LINC Consortium is indebted to a wide range of individuals across many offices and divisions in the consortium members, without whom this programme could not have been delivered.

Programme Team – Coordination, Student Support, Communications & Admin

- Shirley Heaney, National Programme Coordinator (2021-)
- Marie Doherty, Interim National Programme Coordinator (2019-2020)
- Fintan Breen, National Programme Coordinator (2016-2019)
- Helena Thompson, Marketing, Communications & Recruitment Executive
- Dermot Comerford, Former Marketing, Communications & Recruitment Executive
- Irene Hegarty, Higher Executive Officer, Office Manager
- Isabel Walsh, Executive Officer, LINC Administrator
- Fiona O'Brien, Former Clerical Officer
- Ruth O'Donnell, Former Executive Officer

Programme Team – Academic Support, Delivery & Research

- Karina Abbott, Tutor
- Anna Barr, Former Tutor
- Claire Butterly, Former Tutor

- Mary Brereton, Former Researcher
- Sharon Byrne, Former LINC+ Tutor
- Bernie Connell, Former Tutor
- Victoria Coulter Harte, Acting Tutor
- Kathleen Dalton, Tutor
- Carole Dee, Former Tutor
- Lorraine Diggins, Acting LINC+ Tutor
- Ann Donnellan, Lead Tutor
- Karen Dunne, Former Tutor
- Nuala Finucane, Former Tutor
- Edel Fenlon, Former Tutor
- Racheal Govan, Acting Tutor
- Paula Harte, Tutor
- Shirley Heaney, Former Tutor, Former Academic Projects Officer
- Fiona Helbert, Former Tutor
- Paula Hilliard, Former Tutor
- Margaret Joyce, Former Lead Tutor (RIP)
- Sarah Kelleher, Former Tutor, Former Researcher
- Dr Linda Kelly, Researcher
- Linda Madden, Tutor
- Clare O'Shea, Tutor
- Gerardine Roche, Former Tutor
- Rachael Ryan, Former Tutor
- Denise Sheridan, LINC+ Tutor
- Dr Sharon Skehill, Former Tutor
- Susan Quirke-Crowley, Former Tutor

Programme Team – ICT & Blended Learning Support

- Anthony Campbell, Education Technologist
- Pauline Clarke, Former Senior Analyst Programmer
- Seona Stapleton, Former Education Technologist (RIP)
- Karen Walsh, ICT Help Desk Coordinator

Programme and Module Development Team

- Anna Barr (MIC)
- Dr Aimie Brennan (MIC)
- Marion Brennan (ECI)
- Claire Butterly (MIC-LINC)
- Edel Fenlon (MIC-LINC)
- Dr Claire Griffin (MIC)
- Shirley Heaney (MIC-LINC)
- Paula Harte, (MIC-LINC)
- Paula Hilliard (MIC-LINC)
- Dr Kathleen Horgan (MIC)
- Annette Kearns (MU-Froebel)
- Sarah Kelleher (MIC-LINC)
- Phil Lynch (ECI)
- Kim Maguire (MIC)
- Dr Margaret Nohilly (MIC)
- Dr Trevor O'Brien (MIC)
- Anne O'Byrne (MIC)
- Dr Eilís O'Sullivan (MIC)
- Dr Lisha O'Sullivan (MIC)
- Prof. Emer Ring (MIC)
- Dr Marie Ryan (MIC)
- Rachael Ryan (MIC-LINC)
- Dr Orla Slattery (MIC)
- Dr Sharon Skehill (MIC-LINC)
- Patsy Stafford (MU-Froebel)
- Dr Fionnuala Tynan (MIC)



