1. Introduction

Psychoeducational programmes for foster carers are well-recognised support for foster carers (Benesh & Cui, 2017). However, research on foster carer training is scarce (Festinger & Baker, 2013; Kaasbøll et al., 2019). The existing research efficacy of foster carer training programmes is mixed (Solomon, Niec & Schoonover, 2017). In particular, there is a dearth of studies in the Irish context. In Ireland, the foster care system operates a care policy of long term care when children cannot be reunified with their birth family similar to the Dutch (Strijker, Knorth & Knot-Dickscheit, 2008) and Norwegian systems (Jacobsen, Brabrand, Liland, Wentzel-Larsen & Moe, 2018). The USA and UK systems are based on a short term model of foster care, where adoption is emphasized when reunification is not possible with birth family (Barber & Delfabbro, 2005; McSherry et al., 2015). Thus, providing Irish based foster care research, reflecting the Irish foster care context, is important and more likely to support implementation.

Fostering Connections is a multi-session Trauma-informed Care (TIC) psychoeducation intervention that was systematically developed in Ireland. This represents a new departure within the Irish child welfare services (Lotty, 2020). This intervention seeks to support foster carers in caring for children by increasing their capacity to provide TIC and in turn reduce children's trauma-related difficulties. TIC programmes are underpinned by a biopsychosocial theoretical framework of TIC (Bath &Seita, 2018) based on an integration of neurobiology, trauma, attachment and resilience research (Blaustein and Kinniburgh, 2010). The core features of these programmes are 1) understanding the impact of trauma on children, 2) understanding of the impact of caring for children who have experienced trauma on the caregiver and 3) developing skills that address trauma impact through remedial relationships.

In Ireland, foster carers and children in foster care experience substantial gaps in the resources available to them (McElvaney & Tatlow-Golden, 2016). They often do not have access to trauma-specific treatments (McElvaney, Tatlow, Webb, Lawlor, & Merriman, 2013; McNicholas & Bandyopadhyay, 2013). Internationally it is recognised that the needs and behaviours of children that have experienced trauma are often very challenging for foster carers (Nilsen, 2007) and over time can lead to placement instability (Oosterman, Schuengel, Slot, Bullens & Doreleijers, 2007). Given the complexity of many children's behaviour in foster care, foster carers can feel overwhelmed and unprepared as found in Ireland (Roarty, Leinster, McGregor, & Moran, 2018) and elsewhere (Spielfogel, Leathers, Christian, & McMeel, 2011; Storer et al., 2014). Trauma-based behaviours may appear alarming, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and even inexplicable to foster carers (Hobday, 2001; Octoman & McLean, 2014). Hobday (2001) aptly, uses the metaphor of falling into a 'time hole' that captures children's sudden mood changes accompanied by extreme behavioural difficulties. These behaviours may be externalized (aggressive/controlling) and/or internalized (dissociative/rejecting). Worryingly, children's internalized behaviour can be missed by carers (McWey, Cui, Cooper, & Ledermann, 2018; Strijker, Oijen, & Knot-Dickscheit, 2011). Without specific trauma-informed training and support, likely, carers will not be able to recognize or respond effectively to such behaviours (Bovenschen et al., 2016; Dozier, Stovall, Albus, & Bates, 2001; Norgate, Warhurst, Osborne, Traill, & Hayden, 2012; Van Andel et al., 2015). This is understandable given this is outside the realm of 'ordinary' parenting.

The demands of the foster caring role is further complicated by the need to navigate relationships with birth families, social workers, and a myriad of other professionals within

the foster care system. The foster caring role also requires a skill set that supports several possible goals. These include supporting children's reunification with birth families, integration with their family on a long term basis or a transition to another family. Furthermore, these goals can often change. Foster carers also have to cope with the loss of children and worrying about their future welfare when children leave (Gribble, 2016; Lynes & Sitoe, 2018). Thus, fostering can involve high levels of stress (Adams, Hassett, & Lumsden, 2018; Farmer, Lipscombe, & Moyers, 2005; Morgan & Baron, 2011), compassion fatigue (Ottaway & Selwyn, 2016; Sprang, Choi, Eslinger, & Whitt-Woosley, 2015), secondary traumatic stress (Bridger, Binder, & Kellezi, 2020) and personal sacrifice (Forbes, O'Neill, Humphreys, Tregeagle, & Cox, 2011; Murray, Tarren-Sweeney, & France, 2011). Foster carers require effective training and support to minimise the risk of burn-out and pre-maturely terminating their role. This, in turn, places children at risk of placement instability which exacerbates their developmental difficulties (Rubin, O'Reilly, Luan, & Localio, 2007).

Considering the intensive demands on foster carers in caring for children who have experienced trauma and the limitations of current resources in an Irish context, *Fostering Connections*, a TIC psychoeducational programme was developed (Lotty, Dunn-Galvin & Bantry-White, 2020). TIC has emerged as an approach that seeks to support both providers and survivors in the child welfare context (SAMHSA, 2014). *Fostering Connections* seeks to support foster carers (providers) to provide children (survivors) with TIC. The evidence base for such programmes is small, but growing with studies to date reporting limited evidence to support effectiveness (Gigengack, Hein, Lindeboom & Lindauer, 2019; Murray, Sullivan, Lent, Chaplo & Tunno, 2019).

Understanding process is considered an important part of developing and evaluating a complex intervention but does not replace an effectiveness study (Craig et al., 2008). Process evaluations may identify implementation difficulties that may involve fidelity, quality of

delivery and contextual issues beyond the scope of an effectiveness trial (Craig et al., 2008). They support the interpretation of outcome evaluations results (Oakley, Strange, Bonell, Allen & Stephenson, 2006). They also support the iterative process involved in programme development, as findings can support the ongoing development and implementation of interventions.

The outcome evaluation, a quasi-experimental study with a control group (n = 79) for *Fostering Connections* has reported promising results (Lotty et al., 2020). It found foster carers increased their capacity to provide children with TIC as measured by an increased knowledge of TIC, tolerance of child misbehaviour and fostering efficiency. The study also reported a reduction of observed child emotional and behavioural difficulties by their foster carers over the study period of 15 months. In the present study, we sought to explore how the intervention was experienced to provide valuable insight into how it works and how the progress foster carers made can be sustained. Here we present the first process study for the intervention*Fostering Connections.*

2. The Intervention

Fostering Connections is a manualized TIC psychoeducational intervention. It is facilitated by two trained practitioners and one trained foster carer over 6 weeks (6 X 3.5-hour sessions) in a community setting. The content is cumulative, based on information on trauma, attachment, fostering resilience and collaborative working (Lotty et al., 2020). The format is based on experiential exercises, videos, demonstration role-play, discussion, and at-home exercises with a minimum use of slides. Foster carers receive a Toolkit and Homework Copybook. The program aligns with the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) description of trauma-informed child and family service systems as it supports the development of ‘trauma awareness, knowledge, and skills’ in those who have contact with

the child welfare system such as foster carers (NCTSN, 2016:1). *Fostering Connections* provides understanding and knowledge to carers about trauma and effective strategies to promote the restorative relationships with children to reduce the children's trauma and attachment-related difficulties within the context of the Irish care system.

Fostering Connections is designed to align with the TIC intervention phased model, the three pillars of TIC (Bath & Seita, 2018). It maps onto the first stage of building the child's 'felt safety'. Whilst 'felt' safety is emphasised throughout the programme, phases two and three aim to build a trusting relationship between the child and foster carer and subsequently to support the child to develop coping skills. The carer is also invited to explore their trauma history and how this impacts on their foster caring. Foster carers' self-care is also emphasised throughout the programme as a core skill in providing children with TIC. Furthermore, these phases are addressed within the context of the Irish care system and specific attention is given to areas of 1) foster carers' role in supporting children's safe experiences of access with their birth family, 2) foster carer's relationships with birth families and 3) foster carers' relationships with social workers.

This study had two overall aims. Firstly, it aimed to explore how the programme was experienced by foster carers and facilitators. Secondly, it aimed to explore how the experience of the programme could inform future programme implementation. To complete this investigative purpose, we carried out a process study. The study was concerned with gathering data on three main variables, identified by the Medical Research Council's (MRC) guidance on process evaluations (Moore et al., 2015). The MRC is a centre of research and training excellence for the promotion of health in the UK. These main variables are:

- implementation, that is how the programme was delivered,

- the change process, that is how intervention activities and participants' interactions with them generated the process of effecting change and
- contextual issues, that is how external factors to the programme could impede or strengthen the effects of the intervention.

3. Methods

3.1 Recruitment

All foster carers (n= 47) and facilitators (n= 10) who participated in the pilot of the programme were invited to participate in the focus groups. Thus, those that participated volunteered (n= 21). The groups were carried out in September and October 2017. Participants were from the national child welfare agency located in the south of Ireland (Lotty et al., 2020). The inclusion criteria that was applied was as follows:

- Foster carers who had completed the programme i.e. attended at least 4 of 6 sessions (Foster Carer Groups).
- All facilitators who delivered the programme and facilitators in training who observed the programme (Facilitator Group).

3.2 Participants

Differences in gender, whether they participated as a couple and fostering type (general and relative) were represented across groups. The focus groups comprised of three groups (n= 21) and written feedback was received from six participants. The participants who provided written feedback were: 1 Relative Foster Carer, 1 General Foster Carer, 3 Practitioner-Facilitators and 1 Foster Carers-Facilitator who wished to participate in the study but were unable to attend the focus groups. Thus, the total number of participants in the study was 27 (Table 1).

Source of Data	Number	Gender	Couple	Fostering Type/Role
Foster Carers	17	13 (female) 4 (male)	2	3 Relative Foster Carers 14 General Foster Carers
Facilitators	10	10 (female)	n/a	2 Foster Carer-Facilitators 8 Practitioner-Facilitators

Note: Participants are referred to as foster carers or facilitators in the text, with foster carers who were also facilitators noted as such.

Table 1: *Participant Variables*

2.3 Data Collection

Three focus groups were conducted by the first author, a doctoral researcher. The first author was also the programme developer and the primary programme facilitator. She was familiar with the foster care context and the programme curriculum (Author 1). The groups had an average of seven participants and were of one-hour duration. Two groups involved foster carers and one group involved facilitators only. A sequence of semi-structured open-ended questions were asked that sought to understand how the programme was implemented, the process of change and contextual issues that may promote future development and implementation of the programme. Foster carers were asked if they had prior expectations of the programme, how they experienced the programme, the rewards, and challenges of attending and how they have applied their learning to their fostering. Facilitators were asked what their expectations of the programme were, how they experienced the programme, the challenging aspects of facilitating and how they felt foster carers experienced the programme. They were also asked about how they thought foster carers would apply their learning from the programme and if they could identify areas in the programme that needed to be improved. The discussion was recorded using a digital voice recorded. The participants who gave

written feedback were provided with the same questions as the focus groups and returned their responses by post.

3.4 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The approach taken reflected a combined inductive-deductive research orientation (Braun, Clarke, Hayfield & Terry, 2019), where data were explored within a frame of reference of clearly delineated study aims. The analysis was guided by six phases of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarisation with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes and producing the report. The analysis was carried out by the three authors. The first author was a doctoral researcher, the second and third authors were both University Lecturers and researchers. Whilst presented here as a linear procedure, the research process involved both an iterative and in-depth reflexive process over a prolonged period. Drawing on the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985), the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were used for establishing trustworthiness in at each stage of thematic analysis.

The first stage of data analysis involved the first author transcribing all the data and uploading the transcripts to NVivo 12 Plus software. The first author used reflexive journaling during data analysis to examine her influence on the research process and to support trustworthiness (Ortlipp, 2008). The first author coded all the data until exhausted through a process of manual coding using quick code bar (line by line) and auto coding using word frequency. Then, the same/similar codes were collated into one code. This supported initial codes being rooted in the data. The next stage involved the first author grouping codes together to form potential themes and sub-themes to ensure all data relevant to potential

themes was gathered. This stage was supported by triangulation strategy by the three authors where potential themes were agreed through discussion and use of thematic mapping based on the occurrence of themes that were linked to the research questions. The next stage involved a review at the level of coded data, level 1. This involved returning to the raw data and compare it to the developed themes to ensure referential adequacy. We also rechecked that the codes fit with the identified themes and reviewed how the themes fit together to create a coherent representation of the data. Secondly, a review was carried out at the level of full data, level 2. The three authors again through a triangulation strategy used thematic maps where the emerging themes were represented and discussed. Themes were then reviewed for relevance to the study objectives and consensus reached. Four main themes were selected. At this stage, the authors discussed each theme's meaning, explored how each theme fitted with an overall narrative, identified theme names, the ordering and reordering of themes and selection of extracts. Each theme and sub-theme where applicable were explained in a developing narrative. This narrative involved a series of drafts that were developed by the three authors. A final thematic/mind map was created and a table of themes.

4. Findings

In this paper, we report responses from foster carers and facilitators who participated in the programme. Four themes were identified: 1. Facilitating the reflective process 2. Transformative learning, 3. The carer-child relationship and 4. Sustainability (Table 2).

Overarching Theme	Sub-theme
1. Facilitating a Reflective Process	Past Experiences
	Emotional Engagement
	Through the Eyes of the Child
	Stories Shared
2. Transformative Learning	Reframing Experiences
	Changing the Mindset
	Confidence and Hope
3. The Child-carer Relationship	Interacting with the Child
	Changes in the Child
4. Sustainability	Supporting Foster Carers
	Supporting Facilitators
	Training for Stakeholders

Table 2: *Study Themes*

3.1 Theme 1: Facilitating a Reflective Process

The theme ‘Facilitating a Reflective Process’ was identified as an overarching theme. Four interconnecting sub-themes of ‘Past Experiences’, ‘Emotional Engagement’, ‘Through the Eyes of the Child’ and ‘Stories Shared’ were identified as dimensions that mediated the participants' experience of the programme as a reflective process (Table 2).

3.1.1 Past Experiences

A sub-theme that emerged across all groups was ‘Past experiences’. This sub-theme is defined as the foster carers reflecting on past experiences during the programme. Carers felt that despite many years of fostering; it was the first opportunity to reflect on past experiences over six weeks in a group context. Reflection on past experiences had helped foster carers to understand these experiences. For example, many talked about the children they are currently caring and how they made sense of children’s behaviour they recalled:

"I found it helpful with our little girl. I look back to the first time I meet her in a supervised access situation and her mother and father were very stoned… she was only a year old, but she was the adult there and I can see it now….I was so shocked at the condition of the two of them and she was just beautiful…now when I look back I can just see her there she was sitting bolt upright... I can see now how in charge she was." (Foster Carer_3)

In the facilitators' group, the reflective experience of the programme was highlighted as being at the heart of the programme. They felt the programme was very different to other trainings offered to foster carers as it involved foster carers engaging in a reflective process over several weeks. They described the programme experience as "an emotional journey" (Faciltator_2) and a "process" (Facilitator_5). They felt they supported carers through this process to help them make sense of past experiences. This sub-theme 'Past experiences' captures the first facilitator of the reflective process, where foster carers engaged in reflecting on past experiences.

3.1.2 Emotional Engagement

A sub-theme to emerge across all groups was 'Emotional engagement'. In the context of participants' accounts, what emerged from this sub-theme was foster carers' ability to recognise, connect with and express emotions experienced during the programme:

"I found it very upsetting, I had a headache, I needed 15 minutes before they came in from school. I said to my (adult) daughter,.... just take my (foster) child for me for 10 minutes, just take the small one. …the emotional impact, yes, you go back and think of children I had in the past that could I have identified (the trauma) and think that I did not really realise."

(Foster Carer_3)

Facilitators talked about the programme being *"hugely emotional" (Facilitator (Foster Carer) _1*) for foster carers and also having an impact on them as facilitators:

> *"I don't think you can deliver this training without investing in the information and the information is incredibly sad, it is incredibly sad, it really is. When you are talking about attachment and you are telling the carers about healthy attachment and then we start talking about unhealthy attachment and these are the children they are caring for and I think it is very sad and you can't but feel that" (Facilitator_3).*

This sub-theme 'Emotional engagement' captures a second facilitator of the reflective process. The deep emotional engagement experienced by carers which in itself further promoted engagement in a reflective process. This sub-theme may suggest that emotional engagement promoted foster carers' understanding of their own and the children's experience.

3.1.3 Through the Eyes of the Child

A sub-theme that emerged across the groups was the experience of 'Seeing through the child's eyes'. Being able to take the child's perspective, imagining what the child was experiencing was an important impact of the intervention for them, particularly because it helped to support them in changing their perspective:

> *"I think that every child I got along the years, you know, the hardest thing to do was to be able to understand it from the child's point of view.... very often when the social workers would call, they would have a different kind of outlook on it that I would have. And I was always trying to figure that out as well, you know, like what are they*

saying? Can they not see it from my point of view? And now I see why! You know!" (Foster Carer_6)

Foster carers and facilitators talked about how 'seeing through the child's eyes' was also facilitated through the use of the 'Zoe video', a portrayal of a child's experience of foster care. They gave examples of how the video, seeing through Zoe's eyes, helped carers to understand the experience of children in their care. In particular, the 'dress scene' was highlighted in the facilitators' group as a particularly powerful medium for carers to understand the impact of trauma triggers:

"I think the dress is so powerful, how many foster carers say (to the child) I just did something lovely for you and [it gets thrown in your face]. It just really explains it so well." (Facilitator_2)

'Through the eyes of the child' sub-theme captures a further mediator of the reflective process. This sub-theme may suggest that foster carer's engagement in a reflective process was supported by taking the children's perspective.

3.1.4 Stories Shared

'Stories shared' emerged as a sub-theme across all groups and can be defined as the sharing of personal experiences in the group. Carers valued listening to and learning from each other's and the foster carer facilitator's stories. For example, one carer had shared their care experience as a child. Carers felt this promoted their understanding and insight into children's experiences:

"it was really, really was fantastic for me, I opened my mind to so much, I learned so much and listened to all the stories from the carers here." (Foster Carer_1).

A meaningful dimension to foster carers sharing stories was the experience of group safety. This emerged as a sub-theme across all groups capturing group safety was important to promote sharing in the group:

> *"That is a complement to the training, to the group and the way it was set up that they felt safe if they weren't interacting and they did not feel safe they would not have disclosed." (Facilitator (Foster Carer) _1)*

Facilitators also talked about concerns about ensuring group safety were in place. They talked about managing the challenges of personal disclosures in the group. The majority of the facilitators felt unprepared for the level of disclosure in the group and spoke about the need to have a plan in place for such situations

> *“a chap... told us something incredibly intimate about his childhood and then, he had to leave, so none of us were prepared for that level of disclosure I think we need to be ready for those situations…. we should not be surprised; we should be prepared” (Facilitator_3)*

This sub-theme ‘Stories shared’ captured a further mediator of engagement in a reflective process. This sub-theme may suggest that foster carers’ felt supported within the group to share their personal experiences which promoted engagement in a reflective process.

The theme ‘Facilitating a Reflective Process’ describes foster carers engagement in a reflective process which was facilitated by the use of experiential learning methods in a groupwork milieu. The four sub-themes identified as reflecting on past experience, emotional engagement, being able to understand the children's experience (seeing through the child's eyes) and sharing in the group (stories shared) were mediators of the reflective process.

3.2 Theme 2: Transformative Learning

The theme ‘Transformative Learning’ was identified as the second overarching theme. It had three interconnecting sub-themes: Reframing Experience, Changing the Mindset and

Confidence and Hope. These sub-themes underpin the experience of the programme as involving transformative learning as it promoting foster carers to explore unhelpful frames of reference and enable them to become more reflective and open to change (Table 2).

3.2.1 Reframing Experiences

A sub-theme theme that emerged across all groups was ‘Reframing experiences’. This sub-theme captured the process in which foster carers changed how they viewed and understood their experiences with the children in a more trauma-informed ways. Foster carers talked about coming to the programme with knowledge and experience of caring for children with trauma. However, they felt the programme had helped them understand the children’s experiences and behaviours more:

> *“I found it grounded me, actually, that I am more present, you know, even though you get worried about you kids all the time, you be worried, worried, worried. Now I can be more rational about it....I understand the tantrums and bad behaviour, I am learning more from their bad behaviour, than their good behaviour, I find that very strange. I am not as frustrated...” (Foster Carer_3)*

Facilitators also talked about the programme supporting foster carers to build on their experiences by integrating new learning with past experiences. Facilitators talked about how they viewed TIC as providing a framework to underpin working with children in foster care:

> *“It was the framework for understanding trauma.. and in understanding the impact that trauma has on brain development.. that gave a great framework for both the social workers and foster carers to work from now.” (Facilitator_5)*

This sub-theme 'Reframing Experiences’ captures the process in which foster carers integrated past experiences with new learning. This promoted an understanding of the children's experiences of trauma within a new frame of reference.

3.2.2 Changing the Mindset

A sub-theme that emerged across all groups was 'Changing the mindset'. This sub-theme explains how foster carers experienced a change in their perception, their knowledge, and their beliefs, about the children's emotional and behavioural difficulties. This change of perception was described by one participant as *"changing the mindset" (Foster Carer_10)* in how they understood the children. This change in mindset was viewed as a shift from focusing on the children's presenting behaviour to what they imagined laid behind the behaviour. This mindset was described as feeling empathetic and less blaming towards the children:

> *"just from looking at it from the child's points of view, the mindset, …Look, say, no matter what happens, no matter what he does, this is the way he is going to be thinking… you know kinda especially when there are... huge mood swings …. I can't blame this young fella for that... (I am not thinking) 'Christ Almighty! I gave him a tenner a few minutes ago. Why couldn't he be happy?'.... It (the programme) took the judgemental out of it." (Foster Carer_6).*

Facilitators also talked about foster carers changing their mindset. They referred to this colloquially as "*the whole bold thing…." (Facilitator_2).* They described a shift in thinking that the children were 'bold' (badly behaved) to a deeper understanding about the children's behaviour in a trauma context. Facilitators felt this change in mindset was as a defining impact of the programme and was facilitated through the concept of the 'trauma lens' (Faciltator_3). The trauma-informed mindset supported foster carers' capacity to depersonalise the children's behaviour. For some foster carers this change in mindset also involved their changing their perception of the birth family:

"The understanding extended beyond the children to the children's mother …. I also feel she is suffering from trauma, like her daughter...I would have more empathy for her now... she was adopted …I think that is huge now! I did not before: it never entered my head." (Foster Carer_12)

This sub-theme captures how foster carers experienced a change in how they perceived the children (a change in mindset). This sub-theme may suggest that foster carers changed from a fixed negative perception of the children to a more open flexible perception of the children's difficulties within the context of understanding the impact of the children's experiences of trauma.

3.2.3 Confidence and Hope

A sub-theme that emerged across all groups was 'Confidence and hope'. This sub-theme is defined as foster carers having an increased sense of confidence in their role as foster carers and a sense of hopefulness concerning the children's future. Foster carers now felt more equipped. Facilitators talked about foster carers developing practical skills and tools as a major strength of the programme. They felt that the programme was *"practical and it brings in so many skills and strategies" (Facilitator_3)* and it was *"accessible" (Facilitator_2)* so that carers could apply the skills to their daily lives. Participants highlighted that the Toolkit, that accompanied the programme for participants, was particularly useful in supporting foster carers to continue to apply these skills going forward. There was a sense of hope concerning positive future outcomes for the children becoming more realistic after completing the programme owing to the skills they had developed:

"I would have always would have had hope, but it does not mean anything without the tools. But now it is connected to my ability to be able to bring them there, where in the past it would have been hope without the tools." (Foster Carer_12)

Facilitators noted this sense of hopefulness for foster carers was an important message of the programme, with the input of the foster carer-facilitators being particularly helpful. Foster carers described how this increased sense of confidence extended to how they would negotiate their relationships with social workers. This sub-theme ‘confidence and hope’ captures the process in which foster carers experienced an increase in confidence in their fostering and sense of hope about the children’s future. This sub-theme suggests that this confidence and sense of hope was underpinned by an increased understanding of the children’s trauma experiences and skills they had developed on the programme.

The overarching theme of 'Transformative learning' had three interconnecting sub-themes: reframing their experiences, changing their mindset about the children's experiences (to a trauma-informed perspective) and increasing their confidence as foster carers. This confidence was linked to a sense of hopefulness about the children's future and feeling more equipped with the skills they had learnt.

3.3 Theme 3: The Child-carer Relationship

The theme ‘The Child-carer Relationships’ was identified as the third overarching theme. This refers to how the experience of the programme had impacted the child-carer relationship. Two interconnecting sub-themes: Interacting with the Child and Changes in the Child were identified where participants illustrates this theme (Table 3).

3.3.1 Interacting with the Child

The sub-theme ‘Interacting with the child’ emerged as a sub-theme across all groups. This sub-theme is defined as the changes that foster carers made in how they interacted with the children. Foster carers talked about how their understanding of trauma helped them to

recognise that fostering involves parenting differently. They felt they had learnt that traditional parenting strategies were often not effective: They felt they had developed an increased awareness of how they previously responded and had changed these responses to more trauma-informed responses. Foster carers talked about feeling calmer in themselves and as a result, were responding to the children more calmly. They carers talked about creating opportunities to experience fun with the children and these changes being motivated by their desire to improve their relationship with the children:

> *"I am also communicating differently with them, like before I used to wait until xxx (child) went to school and go into his room and search… I said to him, I did not want to be a spy, that I did not want to be searching for things and catching him out, that that was not the kind of relationship I wanted with him." (Foster Carer_12)*

This sub-theme was echoed in the facilitators' group where they talked about how the programme had increased foster carer awareness and reflective skills which led to changes in how they interacted with the children:

> *"It definitely explored their own triggers with them and then, it explored how that impacted how they react to kids." (Facilitator_2).*

This sub-theme 'interacting with the child' captures how foster carers interacted with the children in more trauma-informed ways. This sub-theme may suggest that foster carers became more focused on positive interactions with children motivated by the desire to build closer carer-child relationships and thus, learned to respond to the children in a more regulated way.

3.3.2 Changes in the Child

A sub-theme that emerged from the foster carers groups was ‘Changes in the child’. This sub-theme is defined as the changes in the children that the foster carers observed as they applied their learning during the course of the programme. Foster carers described how the children were calmer. They felt the children were communicating better with them and their behaviour had improved. They felt these changes were connected to how they interacted with the children. In particular, they felt the children being calmer was as a result of they becoming calmer and less reactive to the children’s behaviour:

> *“My husband was away for 3 months, he said, our child is calmer, relaxed, and more open to doing things, a little less demanding and becoming more independent. The difference I see with our child is we communicate more. He is becoming ..less triggered if I don’t answer straight away. He is more confident…He is more affectionate and wants our affection more.” (Foster Carer_11)*

Foster carers felt children communicating more with them was linked to their focus on connecting strategies they had learnt on the programme. Facilitators described how they felt these changes are likely to take time and commitment of carers, owing to the complexity of the children's needs:

> *“It is through their (foster carers) responses that will see the changes, you can't just expect the child to change overnight, and it is through their responses to the child's behaviour is where they will see the change.” (Facilitator_8)*

This sub-theme ‘Changes in the child’ captures the improvements in the children’s emotional and behavioural difficulties observed by the foster carers. This sub-theme may suggest the more regulated and thoughtful responses by carers supported the children’s regulation capacity which in turn led to these observed changes.

The third overarching theme ‘The Child-carer Relationship’ had two interconnecting sub-themes: ‘Interacting with the Child’ and ‘Changes in the Child’. This theme described

how foster carers responded to the children's challenging behaviours more calmly and reflectively (less reactive responses) and becoming more focused on their relationship with the child. Children were described as being generally calmer, more communicative along with improved behaviour (including playing well with friends). Changes in the children were likely to take time owing to the high level of their needs and the required level of commitment in the foster carer.

3.4 Theme 4: Sustainability

The fourth arching theme identified in the study was ‘Sustainability’ referring to participants views on how to sustain the changes foster carers had made and to support future implementation of the programme. Three interconnecting sub-themes were identified: ‘Supporting Foster Carers’, ‘Supporting Facilitators’ and ‘Training Stakeholder’ (Table 2).

3.4.1 Supporting Foster Carers

A sub-theme that emerged across all groups was ‘Supporting foster carers’. This sub-theme describes the supports that foster carers need to sustain the changes they have made. Self-care, improving the foster carer-social worker relationships and follow-up training for foster carers were identified as being needed across groups. Carers described an increased in their awareness of the importance of practising self-care. Self-care was defined in the programme as ‘taking care of your own needs’. This was seen as involving three dimensions: personal, interpersonal, and professional supports. Facilitators also discussed self-care. They felt foster carers would need to practise self-care to sustain them in their role:

“I hope we got them to realise the importance of self-care and the effect burn -out will have, because they are lost if they don't have self-care, I think when you are at it for years you have to, it is a bit like the mask on the aeroplane, if you go down they all go down, let's face it, it is a whole ripple effect.” (Facilitator (Foster Carer) _1)

The need to develop better working relationships between foster carers and social workers to sustain the changes foster carers have made was discussed across all groups. Foster carers talked about having a desire to develop a better working relationship with social workers “*in order to get the best for the kids”* (Foster Carer_4). However, they often felt that receiving the necessary information on the children was problematic and that their views were not listened to or valued. Whilst foster carers shared some positive experiences, these were viewed as being “*lucky that way”* (Foster Carer_6). Similarly, in the facilitator’s group, facilitators talked foster carers often having difficulties getting information on the children and their views were not valued:

"There are pockets of understanding in the social workers and if they are lucky enough to have one of those social workers they are on a great journey, really, whereas if you met a social worker who is not giving them information and doesn't think it is any of their business, God!" (Facilitator_8)

The need to have follow-up training for foster carers was raised across all groups. This sub-theme ‘Supporting foster carers’ captured the need to provide foster carers with ongoing support and training that involve supporting carers’ self-care practises, positive working relationships between carers and social workers and ongoing training.

3.4.2 Supporting Facilitators

A dominant sub-theme that emerged from the facilitator's group only was 'Supporting facilitators'. This sub-theme is defined as supports that facilitators require to deliver the programme successfully. Facilitators talked needing supports to deliver the programme such as consideration of workload commitments, preparation time, and developing facilitator skills required. Facilitators felt there was a need for recognition of the impact of facilitating this programme in the context of their caseloads. They also were concerned about facilitators having the skills and commitment required to facilitate this programme, such as managing disclosures in the group which they had felt unprepared for:

> *"You are asking them (foster carers) to invest in a process to change their thinking and then you are telling them, 'but we don't want to know anything about your life', you can't stop it (disclosures), you can only deal with it. We all have to be ready, have the skills and be ready to deal with." (Facilitator_3)*

Facilitators' also expressed anxiety about the future implementation of the programme and how fidelity to the programme would be protected. This sub-theme captures the need for facilitators to have resources in place including recognition in their workload, supervision, and training to support the successful implementation and sustainment of the impact of the programme.

3.4.3 Training for Stakeholders

A sub-theme that emerged across all groups was 'Training for stakeholders'. This sub-theme describes the need for all stakeholders involved in foster care, to have similar TIC training in order to sustain the programme impact. Foster carers very strongly that all foster carers need

to be trained and that they would have benefited having the training earlier in their fostering careers. The majority of foster carers felt attendance of this programme should be made compulsory for foster carers:

> *"This course should be made mandatory! I honestly don't know how a foster carer could function without this course." (Foster Carer_10)*

Facilitators talked about how the need for training for practitioners to promote trauma-informed practice:

> *"They do their social worker work from the head up, they do it defensively, it is this them and us attitude. It is this: 'we're the professionals and ye are the carers!' They even use those terms; they are already set up to keep the foster carers out here. The foster carers do the babysitting and we do the real work. So, we need to break down those attitudes as well as train people up." (Facilitator_3).*

This sub-theme 'Training for stakeholders' may suggest there is a need for social work training in TIC to support consistency in working with children in foster care and sustainment of this approach.

The fourth overarching theme 'Sustainability' had three interconnecting sub-themes: 'Supporting Foster Carers', 'Supporting Facilitators' and 'Training Stakeholder'. It describes the elements describes by participants that promote the sustainment of changes the foster carers had made and further programme implementation.

5. Discussion

5.1 The Experience of *Fostering Connections*

The study explored how *Fostering Connections* was experienced by foster carers and facilitators. The findings suggest high rates of programme satisfaction and acceptability. This

was reflected in foster carers' views as they felt that they would have benefited from attending the programme sooner in their fostering careers and their support for compulsory attendance of the programme. Research on the effectiveness of voluntary and mandatory participation in training programmes in organisations is mixed, voluntary participation may increase engagement and motivation whilst mandatory participation may give rise to a perception of the programme as more important (Gegenfurtner, Könings, Kosmajac & Gebhardt, 2016). In a meta-analysis of the association between participation types and learning outcomes, it was found that voluntary participation was more likely to increase motivation and transfer of learning as opposed to mandatory participation (Gegenfurtner et al., 2016). The programme requires an investment in a reflective learning process by participants, and thus it is likely that foster carers who attend on a compulsory basis may not be willing to engage in this process and therefore may not benefit.

Program satisfaction and acceptability was also reflected in the participants emotional engagement with the material and the sharing of experiences within the group format. The presence of other foster carers and sharing experiences was also viewed as supportive and highly acceptable similar to other studies (Conn et al., 2018; Madigan et al., 2017). The contextualised content developed to promote relevance and meaning for Irish foster carers was likely to support this (Lotty et al., 2020). Consideration of contextual issues in programme design is important to the success of interventions (Wells, Williams, Treweek, Coyle, & Taylor, 2012). Consistent with findings of similar programmes, a group format that also used an experiential groupwork-based format (Selwyn, Golding, Alper, Gurney-Smith, & Hewitt, 2016; Sullivan, Murray, & Ake, 2016). Creating an emotionally containing and supportive space in group work was also important to facilitate learning given the sensitive content of the programme. These findings suggest the need for facilitators to be skilled in

containing and exploring strong emotions to maximise the impact of the group work process, which requires training and expertise (Brandler & Roman 2015).

5.1.1 The Process of Change

Foster carers who attended the programme appear to have experienced a process of change. This involved a reflective process leading to transformative learning (Mezirow, 1990) that, in turn, promoted a better understanding of TIC. This process of change led to changes in the carer-child relationship. Changes in this relationship were facilitated by the foster carers interacting with the children in more trauma-informed ways, leading to an observed reduction in the children's emotional and behavioural difficulties (Figure 1).

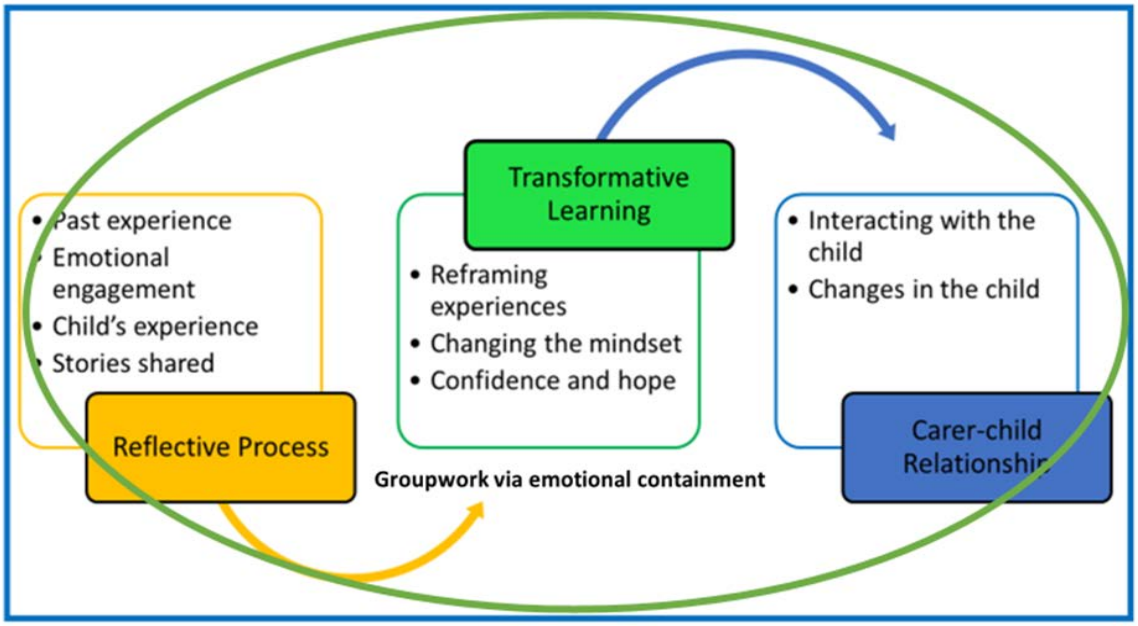

Figure 1. The Change Process of *Fostering Connections*

The study suggests that the engagement in a reflective process was likely to have increased foster carers' 'fostering' reflective functioning. Fostering reflective functioning refers to parental reflective functioning (PRF) in the fostering context. PRF is an essential component to sensitive parenting underpinning parental behaviour and thus, parent-child interactions

(Slade, 2005). There is strong evidence to support the association between PRF and children's attachment security, emotional regulation and reflective functioning (Borelli, Compare, Snavely, & Decio, 2015; Camoirano, 2017; Rostad & Whitaker, 2016).

However, in the fostering realm, it must be acknowledged that caring for children who have experienced trauma can test the parental reflective capacity of foster carers (Dozier et al., 2001), who are often experienced, parents. Previous research indicates that adult reflective functioning gets disrupted by stress associated with childhood attachment experiences that have been (re) activated (Nolte et al., 2013) which may often occur in the foster caring context (Hughes & Baylin, 2012). *Fostering Connections* engaged foster carers in a reflective process that appears to have supported them in developing their 'fostering' reflective functioning. This, in turn, was likely to have helped carers increase their awareness and emotional regulation guarding them against defensive thoughts and reactive behaviours (Sharp & Fonagy, 2008). Emotional regulation is also linked to positive supportive caregiving (Morelen, Shaffer, & Suveg, 2016; Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011). This suggests that the pathway to promoting sensitive and responsive trauma-informed caregiving responses was underpinned by an increased reflective capacity, awareness and emotional regulation in the context of caring for children who have experienced trauma. Themes associated with developing carers reflective functioning capacity are also prevalent in similar studies (Gibbons et al, 2019; Hewitt et al. 2018). Gibbons et al. (2019) described a similar theme: 'Reflection on then and now' where foster carers had engaged in a reflective process which was associated with altering their interactions with children from less reactive to more responsive interactions.

Foster carers also appear to have undergone a process of transformative learning that changed unhelpful frames of reference to enable them to become more reflective and open to change. Transformative learning was experienced as reframing their experiences, changing their mindset about the children's experiences (to a trauma-informed perspective) and increasing their confidence and sense of hopefulness. Hewitt et al., (2018) findings resonate with the present study as they also identified foster carers having experienced 'a shift in perspective'. They described this as involving a transformative process that led to foster carers developing a fresh confidence and language around their parenting.

The study suggests that foster carers reframed 'mindset' was also associated with an increase in empathy for the child and confidence. This is important given research suggests that increased empathy for children is linked to positive caregiving (Padilla-Walker & Christensen, 2011), foster carer resilience (Geiger, Piel, Lietz, & Julien-Chinn, 2016; Oke, Rostill-Brookes, & Larkin, 2013) and to successful placements (Oke et al., 2013). Foster carers' confidence was also found to be a predictor of fostering satisfaction, leading to retention of carers (Eaton & Caltabiano, 2009) and associated with reduced stress that was related to child behaviour (Adams et al., 2018; Morgan & Baron, 2011). The study suggests that foster carer's increased confidence was linked to a sense of hopefulness about the children's future comparably to other TIC programmes (Hewitt et al., 2018). The present study also found carers felt more equipped with the skills they had learnt. Similar to other research, foster carers' skills development was associated with increased foster carer efficacy (Herbert & Wookey 2007).

Foster carers changed how they interacted with the children to more trauma-informed ways of interaction. These involved responding to the children's challenging behaviours in a more

calm and responsive ways (less reactive responses) and becoming more focused on their relationship with the child. Foster carers described how they changed their approach to dealing with challenging behaviours, created more opportunities for positive connecting experiences with the children and communicated with the children in more positive ways (such as bringing more levity to these interactions). These findings are comparable to similar studies where foster carers changed their approach to children's behaviours (Conn et al., 2018; Selwyn et al., 2009). Knowledge of the impact of trauma on the children's development was found to support foster carers' understanding of the importance of engaging in child-directed play (Conn et al., 2018) and using more empathetic parenting approaches (Madigan et al., 2017).

These findings suggest a pathway from foster carers responding to the children in more trauma-informed ways to changes in the children themselves (Figure 1). Children were described as being generally calmer, more communicative along with improved behaviour (including playing well with friends). Overall, the findings of the present study are consistent with the growing body of knowledge about the experiences of TIC foster care programmes.

These findings are positive but should be considered within the context of changes in the children are likely to take time owing to the high level of their needs and the required level of commitment in the foster carer. Consistent with other research, positive changes in children in foster care requires the considerable patience and commitment of foster carers (Lindhiem & Dozier, 2007) and is time-consuming (Rushton, Mayes, Dance, & Quinton, 2003; Tarren-Sweeney, 2017; Wilson, 2006).

5.2 Future Programme Implementation

The study was carried out in an Irish context. The study has highlighted the importance of addressing contextual issues to support future implementation. The need for a more systemic

approach was identified. This includes follow-up training for foster carers, social work support for foster carers and supports for facilitators. Addressing these contextual issues are important as if unaddressed they are likely to pose a barrier to future implementation (Moore et al., 2015). Foster carers need ongoing support through social worker support, follow-up training and support groups. These findings are consistent with research where programmes need follow-up support and training to sustain impact (Whenan et al., 2009).

The role of the facilitator is an important agent of change in the success of programme implementation (Harvey et al., 2002). Our study highlights the need for facilitators to have supervision and support during the programme. They experienced the programme on a deeply emotional level mirroring the experience of foster carers. They felt unprepared for the level of personal disclosures in the group which was an important factor of the reflective process for foster carers. It must also be acknowledged that fostering practitioners often have high caseloads (Swann & Sylvester, 2006) and facilitating training as well as manage their existing workload can be problematic (Vanschoonlandt, Vanderfaeillie, Van Holen, & De Maeyer, 2012). Thus, facilitator supports need to be viewed within the wider context of competing casework responsibilities. Releasing facilitators from their regular work during programme delivery is likely to support programme implementation (Vanschoonlandt et al., 2012).

The need for a parallel TIC practitioner training was highlighted. This would promote more consistent social work practices that may reflect a greater understanding and sensitivity towards the foster carer's role (Rodger, Cummings, & Leschied, 2006). This is turn is likely to support the foster carers' capacity to provide TIC and maintain their fostering confidence they described post-intervention. The lack of research on the quality of TIC information currently being disseminated worldwide, often through resource-heavy training programmes,

has been criticised (Becker-Blease, 2017). In the absence of research-based TIC training, the interpretation of trauma theory by practitioners may lead to multiple and perhaps competing perspectives. For example, in Australia, Tseris (2018) found that trauma discourses strongly underpinned the understanding of child maltreatment and intervention of social workers in mental health services. However, how social workers applied trauma-informed concepts were inconsistent. Some social workers understanding of trauma was used to reinforce a position of expertise, mirroring traditional psychiatric intervention, focusing on the individual's trauma symptoms. While other social workers' understanding was associated with a collaborative and strength-based approach focusing on addressing issues within the person's ecological context. Thus, to successfully address the gap in practitioner training, a systematic research-based approach to developing an effective practitioner TIC intervention is likely to be required.

Future programme fidelity was raised as a concern by facilitators. Fidelity is a complicated process in complex interventions requiring 'critical interrogation of intervention logic' (Hawe, Shiell & Riley, 2004, p. 329*). Fostering Connections* encourages facilitators to draw from their own experiences and recognises that there may be a need for programme adaptation to local needs to support effectiveness (Lotty et al., 2020). For example, facilitating the programme in the evening time, to enable foster carers working during the day to attend may involve adaptation of the programme to a shorter sessional time and the addition of a seventh session. However, fidelity to the essential components of the programme will be required to support implementation. Thus, the need for fidelity research to monitor and enhance the accuracy and consistency of the programme fidelity is necessary to support the integrity of the programme and ensure it is implemented as planned (Craig et al., 2008; Hawe et al., 2004).

5.5 Limitations

There are some limitations to the present study. These findings reflect the views of one specific geographical area within the national child welfare agency in Ireland. The study was limited by the small sample size (n=27) and the length of time to engage with participants. Thus, generalisability of the larger population of foster carers and facilitators may not be possible. Therefore, these findings have limited generalisability and should be interpreted as such. All carers and facilitators involved in the programme were invited to participate. Those that participated in the study self-selected. This may mean that those who had a positive experience were likely to have been more motivated to attend. The focus groups comprised of significantly more women reflecting participants who attended the programme. This produced findings that reflected more the female experience. As one of the authors was the programme developer, the risk of allegiance bias was also a limitation to this study (Munder, Gerger, Trelle, & Barth, 2011).

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