Introduction & Background
The number of students with Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) entering higher education is likely to continue to rise over the coming years as the identification of AS increases & access to services improve (Wing & Potter, 2002). Individuals with AS face a myriad of challenges on entering college one of which is their engagement with the social aspects of college life (Morrison, Sanotti & Hadley, 2009). College life offers multiple social opportunities in which to meet new people & participate in new life & leisure experiences, however, for these students with AS this social world remains elusive.

Literature shows that individuals with AS were found to have severely limited levels of access, & participation in leisure activities in Ireland (Autism Task Force, 2001). Individuals with AS tend not to engage as much as their peers in leisure pursuits & tend to engage in more solitary leisure activities that take place in the home environment (Thompson & Emira, 2010), partly due to a lack of social skills, as well as comprehension of social environments & opportunities for engagement.

Research conducted exploring the needs of university students with AS (Quinn, Gleeson & Nolan, 2009) found that 78.6% of students (n=14) wanted to develop and engage in new leisure pursuits. Research suggests that professionals can promote participation in leisure occupations through a supported context (Garcia Vilamisar & Dattilo, 2010). As a result of this context, the researchers developed a three phase approach to leisure enhancement by adapting the Leisure Enhancement through Occupational Therapy approach developed by Baxter, Fried, McAtamney, White and Williamson (1995) to enhance the leisure participation of university students with AS.

Aim
Leisure is an important daily occupation, and has been found to contribute to life balance, health promotion, and wellbeing (Garcia-Vilamisar & Dattilo, 2010). Occupational Therapists can support engagement in leisure occupations, and with this perspective, this research sought to explore the leisure occupations of university students with AS, it also offered the opportunities to participate to meaningful leisure occupations within a group context, and furthermore evaluated their engagement in these leisure occupations.

Methodology
Study Design:
A sequential, explanatory mixed-methods research (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2003) approach was employed by the researchers. A three phase approach to the mixed methods design study was utilised.

Phase One: Exploration: To discover the leisure occupations, leisure goals & patterns, & satisfaction of university students with AS

Phase Two: Engagement: In the six week leisure group, participants were randomly assigned to one of two groups, in phase two.

Phase Three: Evaluation: To explore the students’ perceptions of their engagement & participation in the six week leisure group

Leisure Occupations of students with AS: The leisure occupation most frequently identified by the students was ‘playing computer games’, this was identified by eight of the participants (72.7%) in phase 1. Reading & watching television were also rated highly by the students. “Well I like playing video games, I play the guitar, I started recently to write, I used to draw… so I do all those things… I usually just play alone.”

“Computer games… on my own and Xbox sometimes I would play on my own.”

The results of this study further show that very few of these students were involved in sports clubs. Additionally, the students reported that they engaged in passive, solitary activities, that they primarily did in their own homes. “Interested in other people… no I don’t think so, I can’t think of anything… no, not particularly no, not now anyway, not recently.”

Barriers to Leisure Participation & Engagement: Three main themes emerged;
1. Difficulties with social skills and social interaction
2. The demands of college
3. Financial constraints.

“It’s very hard to develop social skills when you haven’t really enjoyed socialising…

‘not knowing anyone there and not knowing whether I’d fit in easily, you know that kind of awkwardness or the prospect or fear of that kind of awkwardness would kind of keep me away from (social) situations’

Desire for Leisure Engagement: 45.5% of the students were not happy with their leisure time, they wanted to try new leisure activities, b. have the opportunity to meet new people in leisure groups; & c. they wanted to meet new people and make friends.

“I’d like to try something new (leisure), I’m in college, so do new things”

“It would be nice to be able to do another sport, like play tennis or something.”

3. Learned about the work-leisure balance

“I learnt to think more about the leisure/work balance…”

4. Got involved in the social part of college life

“What I enjoyed most was the fact that I was doing something you know with other people in the college’

5. Developed my social skills

“I just enjoyed hanging out with people”

“Well I’ve enhanced my social skills.”

6. Made friends

“Well…an opportunity to make friends, that’s why I found it most important.”

“I’ve made friends and I enjoy hanging out with them, to give an honest answer like.”

“I’ve made a friend.”

7. Got to be part of the group

“I thoroughly enjoyed being part of that leisure group.”

“I made the tea a couple of times, I’m sounding very organised, aren’t I, that’s not very like me.”

“Even after the project was finished, the group stayed on.”

Conclusion
This research has demonstrated that through the use of a leisure group, individuals with AS were more able to engage in leisure, & develop practical skills and know how within a real life context. It can also enhance their connectedness within the college community, as well as establishing a sense of engagement and participation within a group context. Attendance, participation, enjoyment and satisfaction was very high. This is one of the biggest strengths of this study, the fact that these students with AS participated in the leisure group week-on-week, consistently is a success, given that individuals with AS experience difficulties with social communication & interaction. These findings correspond to the call by Schalock (2004), to develop services for individuals with AS to support their leisure occupations.

References


Thompson, D., & Emira, M. (2011). “They say every child matters, but they don’t”: an investigation into parental and carer perceptions of access to leisure facilities and respite care for children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Disability & Society, 26(1), 65-78.