



# Initial Mapping Activity: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

I. Lessner Listiakova<sup>1</sup>, D. Preece<sup>1</sup>, J. Stošić<sup>2</sup>, N. Lisak<sup>2</sup>, J. Troshanska<sup>3</sup> & J. Kossewska<sup>4</sup>

## METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken by the academic partners within the ASD-EAST project (the University of Zagreb, the Pedagogical University of Krakow, Autism Macedonia Blue Firefly and the University of Northampton during autumn/winter of 2018-19). The study was undertaken gathering both quantitative survey data and qualitative focus group data, gathered from both mainstream and special education teachers. The quantitative dataset comprises data from 294 teachers:

- 103 (35%) from Croatia,
- 73 (25%) from North Macedonia,
- 118 (40%) from Poland.

One hundred and thirty-seven (47%) worked in mainstream schools, while 157 (53%) worked in special education systems. The qualitative dataset comprised of participant from six focus groups, one with teachers from mainstream schools and one with teachers from specialised settings in each country.

## FINDINGS

### Previous training

Analysis of the dataset revealed that there were differences in both initial and further training about ASD, both between countries and between mainstream and special school teachers. In general, mainstream teachers had received less training.

### Characteristics of autism

Teachers held a wide range of views regarding the characteristics of autism, with many significant differences regarding characteristics and behaviours. This identifies a need for consistent training.

### Attitudinal differences

Responses to attitudinal questions revealed that there were differences in attitude towards both the nature of autism and the needs and potential of children with autism between the three countries. There were also statistically significant differences between mainstream and special school teachers. In general, mainstream teachers were more likely to hold incorrect beliefs – such as that children could ‘grow out’ of ASD. They were also more likely to hold pessimistic views regarding the education of children with ASD, whilst downplaying the importance of specialised approaches.

### Knowledge about methods used in autism

Analysis identified a very low level of previous training – or perceived competence – in any methods. Special school teachers reported slightly higher levels of training and competence than mainstream teachers, but this remained extremely low.

### Use of different methods

Despite the low levels of training and perceived competence, the majority of these approaches were in use within the three countries. There was a higher use of established approaches in ASD in special schools than in mainstream schools. In many mainstream schools, ASD-specific approaches were never used. This suggests that many teachers are using specific approaches either without training or without feeling competent in their use.

### Teachers' confidence

More than half of all teachers were confident in only two of 22 identified domains of working. Special education teachers were generally more confident than their mainstream counterparts in working with autism. More than 50% of mainstream teachers did not express confidence in any of the 22 domains, while more than 50% of special educators were confident in only six of the 22 domains. Croatian teachers were more confident overall.

### Teachers' training needs

There was high agreement (almost 90%) that teachers would benefit from training. Training with regard to theoretical information was identified as least important, but was still seen as relevant by more than half of teachers. Practical strategies, particularly those relevant to teachers' own settings were identified as of high importance, as was supervision and the acquisition of tools and resources. Teachers expressed a strong desire to undertake self-experiential learning.

### Challenges in supporting students with ASD

Challenges specialist teachers faced in their work with children with ASD were similar in all three countries. Both in mainstream and special settings, specialist teachers felt the main issue is managing students' challenging behaviour. Teachers in mainstream schools found it difficult to adapt lessons and the classroom environment. They also felt a lack of clear criteria or guidance for inclusion of students with ASD into mainstream classrooms. Teachers in special settings perceived addressing the complex needs of their students as the main challenge in their work, followed by the difficulty to adapt the physical environment of their schools and classrooms to suit these complex needs. Across settings and countries, specialist teachers found it difficult to collaborate with parents and to communicate about their expectations and involvement in the educational process.

Collaborating with other professionals presented a challenge too. Specialist teachers felt under pressure from high workload and carrying the responsibility for inclusion of students with ASD in mainstream classroom and felt unsupported by class teachers and teaching assistants due to their lack of knowledge and understanding. Specialist teachers in special settings mentioned that communication with medical doctors and psychologists is insufficient not providing them with enough necessary information about the needs of children with ASD.

### Training needs of specialist teachers

Teachers reflected their need of further training in specific intervention areas, mainly in addressing challenging behaviour, communication and social skills, and sensory needs of children with ASD. Mainstream teachers would like to learn how to use strategies in the classroom, adapt and individualise their teaching. Teachers in special settings were interested in methods focusing on specific areas of need of their students. Participants in all focus groups identified their need to improve communication and collaboration with parents and other professionals.

1 University of Northampton, United Kingdom  
2 University of Zagreb, Croatia  
3 Autism Macedonia Blue Firefly, North Macedonia  
4 Pedagogical University of Krakow, Poland