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Evaluation Report Summary

INTELLECTUAL OUTPUT 04

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Summary of key findings

1.1 Introduction to the project

This document reports the key findings of the Erasmus+ KA2 Strategic Partnership Autism Spectrum Disorder – Empowering and Supporting Teachers (ASD-EAST) (Grant 2018-1-UK01-KA201-047872). ASD-EAST was established to begin to address an identified shortfall in teacher knowledge and training regarding Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and focused on developing appropriate training to support teachers to effectively include learners with ASD in education within Central/Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

The project was carried out between September 2018 and August 2020. Its specific focus was on the development of training for specialist primary age range teachers (in both special school and mainstream/inclusive settings). The materials were developed and tested in three counties: Croatia, the Republic of North Macedonia (hereafter referred to as North Macedonia) and Poland.

1.2 Evaluation methodology

The project was evaluated using a combined process and outcome methodology (Royce et al., 2016), utilising both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. Evaluation activity in the project was undertaken by the partners within the evaluation workstream:

- Centre for Education and Research, University of Northampton, UK (project coordinator)
- Faculty of Education and Rehabilitation Sciences, University of Zagreb, Croatia (workstream lead)
- Pedagogical University of Krakow, Poland
- Autism Macedonia Blue Firefly, North Macedonia.

1.3 Initial mapping

Initial mapping activity (O1) was undertaken to identify good practice in teacher education in ASD and to identify teachers' knowledge confidence and training needs. Teachers in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland were surveyed (n = 294) and six focus groups were carried out during autumn/winter 2018-19. Key findings were:

- Teachers held **widely differing** and sometimes **incorrect opinions** regarding ASD, with mainstream teachers being most likely to have **incorrect** beliefs or **pessimistic** views.
- Teachers reported a **very low level of previous training** in – or **confidence** in using – many common 'autism-friendly' teaching methods.
- Despite this, the majority of these methods were **in use** within the three countries. This suggests that the majority of teachers are using such methods without training and without feeling confident in using them.
- There was high agreement (almost 90%) that **teachers would benefit from training**, and a particular desire was expressed for **practical strategies**.

All of this supported and validated the need for the project to be undertaken.



1.4 Evaluation of ASD training curriculum and materials

Findings from the mapping phase informed the development of the ASD-EAST Curriculum (O2) and Training Materials (O3). Twelve hours of training was developed, and the materials were piloted with teachers (n = 259) in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland in autumn/winter 2019-20. Pretraining, post-training and follow-up questionnaires were administered, and follow up interviews were undertaken. These identified that:

- There was **high satisfaction** with the **trainings** with 92.5% of respondents stating that their expectations were fulfilled
- There was high satisfaction with the **content**, in terms of the balance between **theory and practice, examples and relevance**
- Over 90% of participants reported learning **methods that they could use straight away**
- Extremely high satisfaction was reported regarding the **delivery** of the training and the **trainers**
- Over 95% of participants would **recommend** the training to others, and it was also felt that the training would be **relevant for a wider range of participants**

These are **extremely positive findings** which identify the **importance** and **value** of the project.

1.5 Further evaluation activity

Feedback from the project's four virtual multiplier events, which were attended by over 1,300 delegates, was also extremely positive. It was felt by 98% of delegates who completed evaluations (n = 344) that the materials would provide teachers with increased knowledge and useful strategies. The same percentage felt that the materials could be used across other EU countries.

The project was also evaluated with regard to its reach and effectiveness of dissemination activity. The workshops have had an indirect impact across 88 schools, 3,867 teachers and 38,861 children. The multiplier events had excellent reach, with over 1,300 delegates from over 20 countries. Similar effective reach was achieved by the project website. This was accessed by more than 5,000 visitors from 81 countries. The project's e-newsletter, produced six times during the project lifespan, was subscribed to by 1,837 individuals; and further audiences were reached via YouTube and Twitter. Eleven physical and virtual academic conference presentations were given during the project lifetime: more would have occurred but for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Overall this demonstrates the commitment of the project team to engage with the stakeholder audiences identified within the proposal – specialist teachers, other education professionals, policy/decision-makers, autism/disability community and the wider public – and evidences the success of its strategies. Again, these are positive findings that show how the project team has worked to carry out the project in line with the proposal.



1.6 Conclusions and recommendations

The ASD-EAST project was **extremely successful**.

It developed a **high-quality curriculum and materials** based on teachers' identified training needs.

It delivered training to 259 specialist teachers in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland: this is **more than double** the number of teachers for which we initially planned.

Teachers have been **overwhelmingly positive** regarding the curriculum and materials: participation in ASD-EAST training has **improved** their **knowledge** and **confidence**, and they identify the **value** of such training for teachers, other professionals and parents alike.

As a result of undertaking this project we recommend that:

- Appropriate Initial Training, Continuing Professional Development and support for teachers should be provided across Europe
- It should be ensured that accurate understanding of autism and individualisation of learning and teaching are central to training provided
- Training should be designed to ensure a holistic approach, and to provide teachers with the skills to work effectively with families and other professionals.

These recommendations are developed further within the ASD-EAST Policy Recommendations (O6).



Introduction to the project

2.1. Autism Spectrum Disorder and education

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a lifelong condition affecting approximately 1% of the population (Baird *et al.*, 2006). ASD impacts all aspects of the individual's experience, including how they learn (Dawson *et al.*, 2008). Children and young people with ASD share common education needs with all others and are entitled to appropriate education. However, they have specific and special needs regarding the characteristic difficulties in autism related to communication, social understanding, inflexibility and sensory processing issues. Education has been identified as a key intervention for this group, and meaningful access to effective education is crucial (Simpson *et al.*, 2011).

Due to the diverse nature of the autism spectrum, there is no single educational intervention that is effective or appropriate for all, and therefore teachers need a range of skills and strategies (Iovannone *et al.*, 2003). However, many teachers do not have access to appropriate training (Morrier *et al.*, 2011). Providing such education is challenging in all settings.

Research has identified that educational provision for children with ASD is unequal and inequitable, and that while there are pockets of good practice there are also significant challenges (Charman *et al.*, 2011; Jones *et al.*, 2008; Daly & Ring, 2016). Problems exist regarding the skills, knowledge and expertise of educators working with these children across the range of educational settings, including both special and mainstream education, with training being fragmented and often not informed by research (Marshall & Goodall, 2015; Sekušak-Galešev *et al.*, 2015). There is also a lack of evidence regarding the impact of providing training regarding ASD on teachers' subsequent practice (Alexander *et al.*, 2015).

Autism awareness is patchy and often poor across Europe in general and within Central/Eastern Europe & the Balkans in particular (Ombudsman of the Republic of Macedonia, 2015; Suchowierska & Walczak, 2013; Trnka & Skočić Mihić, 2012). A particular need for support has been identified within Eastern Europe and the Balkans (Bukvić, 2014; Starczewska *et al.*, 2011; Trajkovski, 2017). While there is undoubted good practice in some settings, there are also significant training and developmental needs.

2.2. Autism Spectrum Disorders: Empowering and Supporting Teachers – the (ASD-EAST) project

ASD-EAST was established to begin to address this shortfall and focused on developing appropriate training to support teachers to effectively include learners with ASD in education within this region. Funding was obtained from the European Commission's Erasmus+ programme, and the two-year project commenced in September 2018, with the aim of empowering specialist educators in three countries (Croatia, Poland and North Macedonia) to support effective inclusion of children with ASD in education, by providing these educators with appropriate skills, knowledge, strategies and locally-appropriate training.

This project supported the implementation of national education policy within these countries such as:

- Croatia's National Strategy for Education Science and Technology (2014)
- the Macedonian Laws on Primary and Secondary Education (1995)
- and Poland's Law on School Education (2018) and the Provisions Introducing the Law on School Education (2018).



In addition, it addresses pan-European policy and goals such as Empowering Teachers to Promote Inclusive Education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2015) and Inclusive Education for Learners with Disabilities (European Parliament, 2017).

The ASD-EAST project united a partnership of schools, academics and governmental/non-governmental organisations from Belgium, Croatia, North Macedonia, Poland and the United Kingdom to:

- undertake an initial mapping exercise, identifying both country-specific and Europe-wide good practice, as well as areas needing development with regard to the effective educational inclusion of children with ASD (with a specific focus on Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland)
- develop locally appropriate training and materials for specialist educators to support the educational inclusion of children with ASD (in both special education and mainstream/inclusive settings)
- use these materials to pilot the training with specialist educators from both special and mainstream across Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland
- evaluate the appropriateness of the materials and the impact of the training on teachers' skills and subsequent practice
- share the programme and materials with stakeholders (both within these three countries and more broadly across Europe) and to make recommendations to policy-makers with the intention of improving teacher-training in ASD in the longer term.