

**ASD-EAST**



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# ASD-EAST: Empowering and supporting teachers to work with autism in Eastern Europe

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# Content of session



- Rationale for and outline of project
- Mapping activity undertaken
- Findings of mapping
- Implications for training materials
- Work still to do

# ASD-EAST project – rationale

- Autism is a lifelong condition affecting approximately 1% of the population
- Education has been identified as a key intervention for this group, and meaningful access to effective education is crucial
- Due to the diverse nature of autism, no single educational intervention is effective or appropriate for all: therefore teachers need a range of appropriate skills and strategies
- A particular need for support has been identified within Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where there are significant training and developmental needs
- Therefore this 2-year EU-funded project (Sept 2018-Aug 2020) has been developed

# ASD-EAST project - objectives

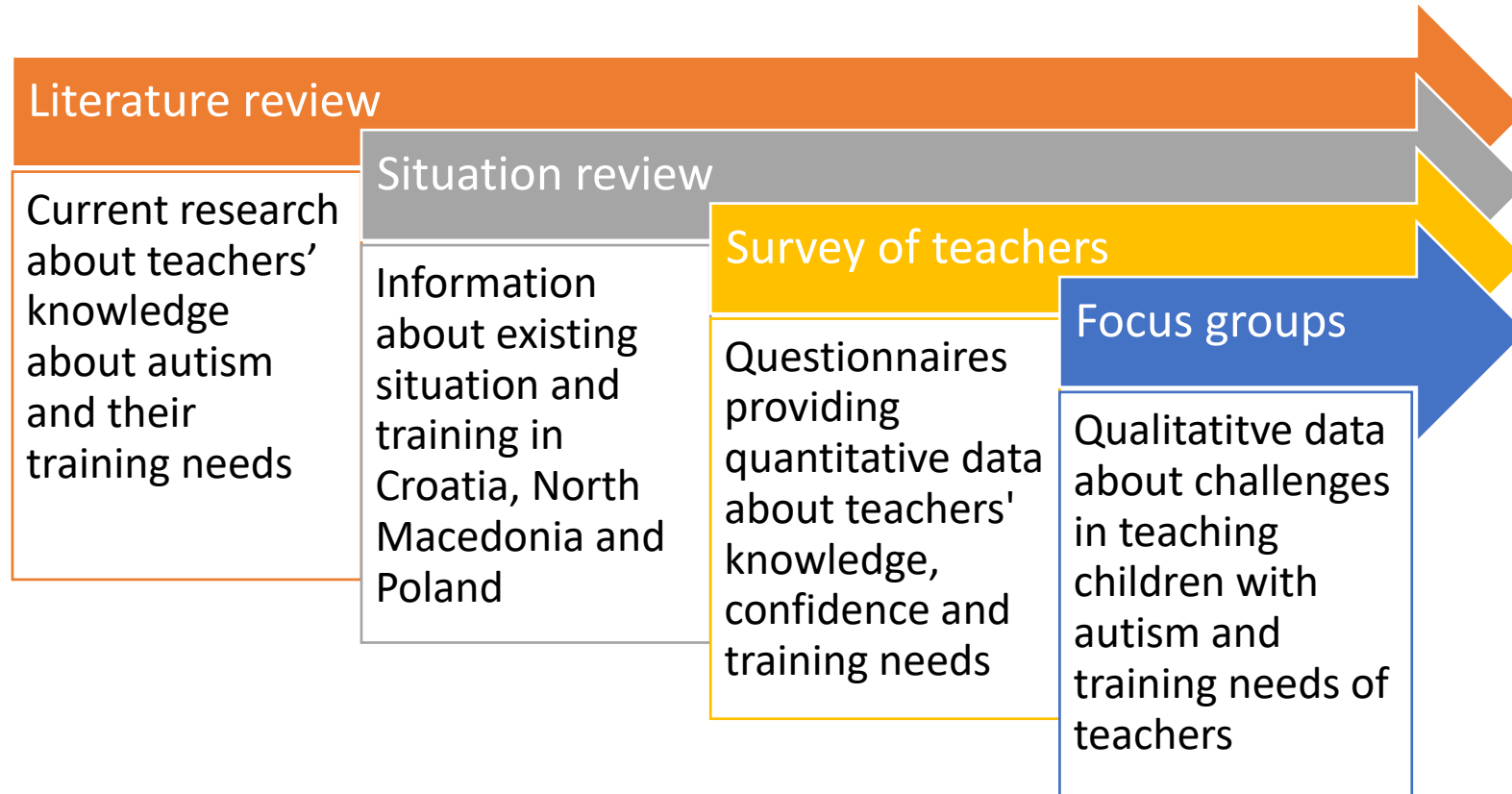
- Undertake initial mapping activity to identify
  - country-specific and Europe-wide good practice
  - developmental needs with regard to the effective educational inclusion of children on the autism spectrum in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland
- Develop locally appropriate training and materials for specialist educators to support the educational inclusion of primary-age children on the autism spectrum (in both special education and mainstream/inclusive settings)
- Use these materials to:
  - pilot the training with specialist educators from both special and mainstream settings across Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland
  - evaluate the impact of this training on teachers' skills and practice
- Share the materials with stakeholders and professionals

# ASD-EAST partnership

- 4 x academic partners:
  - University of Northampton, UK
  - University of Zagreb, Croatia
  - Pedagogical University of Krakow, Poland
- 3 x schools
  - Centre for Autism, Zagreb, Croatia
  - School No 12, Krakow, Poland
  - Special School Zlatan Sremec, Skopje, North Macedonia
- 1 x SME
  - Target Autism, UK
- 2 x NGOs
  - Autism Macedonia Blue Firefly, North Macedonia
  - Autism Europe, Belgium
- Project advisory group: UK and Czech Republic



# Initial mapping activity



- Initial activity focused on the mapping the ‘state of the art’ regarding existing models and practice regarding teacher education in autism, as well as identifying the current knowledge, attitudes and training needs of teachers.
- University of Northampton reviewed the literature regarding teacher education in autism in general (*Lessner Lištiaková & Preece, 2020, in press*).
- Partners from Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland reviewed local policy and practice.
- The literature review informed the development of a structured questionnaire designed to identify the knowledge, confidence and training needs of specialist educators in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland.

# Literature review: key themes

Theme	Area of skill
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teachers' knowledge, skills and confidence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• General teaching skills</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collaboration with other teachers</li><li>• Collaboration with other professionals</li><li>• Collaboration with families</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Collaboration skills</li></ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Communication and social skills of students on the autism spectrum</li><li>• Managing challenging behaviour of students on the autism spectrum</li><li>• Adaptations and modifications of teaching and learning for students on the autism spectrum</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Specialised skills</li></ul>



# Situation review: inclusion and special education in Central/Eastern Europe and the Balkans

- Historically based upon principles of defectology (Vygotsky, 1929)
- Combination of psychological, physiological, clinical and pedagogical approaches
- Defectologist:
  - An expert on disability
  - Qualified to use diagnostic tools
  - Work in specialist schools and centres
- Moving towards more western viewpoint, but still strong focus on role of expert and intervention as therapy within medical model



# Croatia



- South east European country of over 4 million inhabitants with most of the population concentrated in Zagreb, Split, Rijeka and Osijek
- Understanding re autism is emergent, with no clear diagnostic policy or pathway (Ombudsman for Children with Disabilities, 2014)
- Estimated 3,000 individuals with autism in Croatia, most under 18 years (Benjak, 2015) – suggesting an identified prevalence under 8 per 10,000
- Most diagnoses – classic autism, associated learning disabilities
- Education policy supporting inclusion since 1980, but only 0.15% of children with autism are fully included in mainstream primary education (Sekušak-Galešev *et al.*, 2015)
- Most school-aged children with autism educated in special schools or special units.

# North Macedonia



- Land-locked country in southern Balkans bordered by Kosovo, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece and Albania
- Population of 2 million, a quarter of whom live in Skopje
- Prevalence of autism – unknown
- Recent legislation (2019) mandating full inclusion
- 2014-2015 survey identified only 26% of primary schools included pupils with autism, and less than 6% of schools had provided staff with training about autism
- Fewer than 11% of 482 children with special educational needs included in mainstream education in Skopje are on the autism spectrum.
- In contrast, a third of pupils in the country's four special schools have a diagnosis of autism (Ministry of Education & Science, 2015)

# Poland



- Central European country with population of almost 38 million.
- Information regarding autism unclear and imprecise – National Health Fund figures from 2012 report 13,261 individuals under 18, identified prevalence of 3.4 per 10,000
- Again, legislation supports education inclusion; however Roleska et al. (2018) identify that Poland has no specific strategy regarding the educational inclusion of children with autism
- Further studies show that inclusion there is emergent, with many children experiencing segregation, particularly in rural areas, and highlight the need for autism awareness among teachers (Urbanovská, Kantor and Růžička 2014).

# Survey of teachers

- Questionnaire collected quantitative data regarding:
  - teachers' knowledge and understanding of autism
  - their attitudes towards different types of educational approaches in autism (and the extent to which they are used)
  - their confidence in addressing the educational needs of such children
  - their evaluation of their own training needs
- Distributed to teachers between November 2018 and February 2019: in total 560 questionnaires were distributed and 340 were returned. After data cleansing, the sample comprised 294 usable responses (103 from Croatia, 73 from North Macedonia, 118 from Poland)
- In addition, focus groups gathered qualitative data from teachers in special education and mainstream/inclusive settings from Krakow, Skopje and Zagreb in December 2018.
- Article on quantitative aspects under review (*Lisak et al.*)

# Who responded?

- Respondents – n = 294: 94% were female, 6% male
- Age: 41% were 20-35, 44% were 36-50, 14% were over 50
- 53% worked in special schools, 47% in mainstream/inclusive schools
- 93% worked in urban settings, 7% in rural areas
- 80% had an MA or higher degree, 20% had a BA
- Experience: <1 year: 29%; 1-5 yrs: 32%; 6-10 yrs: 19%; >10 yrs: 20%

# Teachers' attitudes and understanding

- **Some respondents held narrow, stereotypical or factually inaccurate understandings regarding autism**
  - 53% thought most or all individuals with autism cannot make eye contact
  - 38% thought children with autism do not want friends
  - 17% thought they have no emotions
- **Differences in attitude between the three countries**
  - 73% Croatian and 53% North Macedonia respondents thought children on the autism spectrum could not be educated alongside mainstream peers
- **Mainstream teachers were more likely to**
  - hold **inaccurate beliefs** – such as that children could 'grow out' of autism(33% vs 19%)
  - hold **pessimistic views** regarding the education of children on the autism spectrum
  - minimise the importance of **specialised approaches**

# Previous training

- 66% had received training about autism at university; 66% had received further training – BUT mostly **theoretical**
- Fewer than 60% had received any training in **teaching methods**
- Even fewer had received **practical experience** while training

Content of training	Theory about autism	Teaching and intervention methods	Practical experience
YES	205 (69.7%)	169 (57.5%)	125 (42.5%)
NO	88 (29.9%)	123 (41.8%)	167 (56.8%)



# Training and perceived competence regarding specific approaches

- Though almost 58% said they received some training, the survey revealed
  - **very low overall training in commonly used approaches (3-15%)**
  - **even lower confidence** in their use (1-8%)
  - special school teachers scored slightly higher than mainstream school teachers

# Examples of specific approaches

Specific approach	Received training	Feel confident	Using approach sometimes/everyday
TEACCH	8.8%	6.5%	71.8%
Social stories	10.5%	5.1%	79.9%
AAC: signing, PECS	15%	8.2%	60.9%
Social skills	7.5%	4.1%	84.5%
ABA	8.2%	5.1%	79.2%
Sensory approaches	10.9%	6.8%	78.6%

# ASD-appropriate strategies – training and use

- Despite the low levels of training and perceived competence, many specific approaches used within the three countries
- Higher use of specific approaches in autism in special schools than in mainstream schools
- In many mainstream schools, autism-specific approaches were never used
- Many teachers are using specific approaches either without training or without feeling confident in their use.

# Teacher confidence

- Lowest areas of confidence:
  - managing anxiety (31%)
  - supporting turn-taking (33%)
  - addressing sensory needs (36%)
  - responding to behaviour and emotions (37%)
- Special education teachers generally more confident than mainstream teachers
  - Over half of mainstream teachers unconfident in all areas
  - Over half of special school teachers confident in  $\leq 30\%$  of areas
- More than 90% of all teachers expressed desire for further training, based around **practical strategies**

# Focus groups - challenges

- Six focus groups: one with teachers from mainstream schools and one with teachers from specialised settings in each country.
- Challenges similar in all three countries.
- Teachers in mainstream schools:
  - difficulty to adapt lessons and the classroom environment
  - lack of clear criteria/guidance for inclusion of students with ASD into mainstream classrooms.
- Teachers in special settings:
  - addressing the complex needs of pupils
  - adapting the physical environment of their schools and classrooms to suit these complex needs.



# Focus groups - challenges

- Teachers in both settings: main challenge – managing students' challenging behaviour.
- Collaboration/communication with parents
- Collaboration with other professionals
  - teachers under pressure from high workload and carrying the responsibility for inclusion of students in mainstream classroom
  - felt unsupported by other school staff due to their lack of knowledge and understanding.
  - limited information-sharing with other professions



# Conclusions

- Specialist teachers across both mainstream and special educational settings lack knowledge and training to effectively implement inclusion.
- Many teachers have an inaccurate understanding of autism, possibly in part resulting from the limited diagnosis of autism in these countries, and the subsequent range of children that respondents have met.
- General lack of confidence in working with pupils with autism.
- Autism-appropriate approaches are either unused or implemented unsystematically.
- Specific areas of need:
  - accurate information about autism
  - strategies to manage behaviour and sensory sensitivities
  - Strategies to support children's emotional regulation and social interaction
  - tools to support curriculum access.





# Development of training materials

Supporting communication

Emotional understanding

Social skills

Sensory needs

Modifications and adaptations

Challenging behaviour

- 6 modules
- 2hr sessions
- differentiated for inclusive and special school settings

# Teacher training sessions and evaluation

## TRAINING OF SPECIALIST TEACHERS

- ASD-EAST trainings: October 2019 – January 2020
- 2 trainings per country (inclusive/special school staff) in Zagreb, Skopje and Krakow
- Total number of teachers trained: 258

## EVALUATION OF TRAININGS and MATERIALS

- Pre- and post- training questionnaires
  - Follow-up questionnaires
  - Follow-up interviews (n= 5 per training)
- (+ focus groups with training teams re process/materials)



# Training session participants



	Special schools	Mainstream schools
Croatia	29	25
North Macedonia	59	48
Poland	57	30
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>145</b>	<b>103</b>

# Work still to be undertaken

- Revision of training materials based on feedback from teachers, training teams and project reference group
- Analysis of evaluation data – quantitative and qualitative
- Presentation of data to conferences in Skopje, Zagreb and Krakow (March/April)
- Development of policy recommendations and presentation at European Parliament (June)
- Finalisation of project (August) and submission of final report (October)



## • Thanks

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# Disclaimer

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