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Format – paper (up to 6 authors, 2 presenting authors)

*Title (up to 20 words)*

**Teaching Children on the Autism Spectrum: Perspectives and developmental needs of specialist educators from Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland**

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*First and second choice network*

1. Professional Learning and Development (1)

2. Inclusive Education (4)

*3 - 5 keywords*

Teacher education, autism, specialist educators

*General description on research questions, objectives and theoretical framework (e.g. topic, research question, objective, conceptual or theoretical framework …). Bear in mind that the European/international dimension is vital to the success of your submission (600 words)*

Autism is a lifelong condition with a median worldwide prevalence of one per 160 (Elsabbagh et al. 2012) that impacts all aspects of the individual’s experience, including how they learn (Dawson et al., 2008). Children and young people with autism 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, and meaningful access to effective education is crucial (Simpson et al., 2011).

Due to the diverse nature of the autism spectrum, no single educational intervention is effective or appropriate for all, and teachers need a range of skills and strategies (Iovannone et al., 2003). However, 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 (Marshall & Goodall, 2015; Sekušak-Galešev et al., 2015). Autism awareness is patchy and often poor across Europe in general and a particular need for support and professional development 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.

A 2-year European Commission-funded project was established to empower specialist educators working in inclusive and special education primary school classrooms in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland to support the effective inclusion of children with ASD in education, by providing these educators with appropriate skills, knowledge, strategies and locally-appropriate training. A pan-European partnership of schools, academics and governmental/non-governmental organisations from Belgium, Croatia, North Macedonia, Poland and the United Kingdom is working together to:

* develop a core curriculum and locally appropriate training and materials for these countries
* 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 attending professional development on teachers' skills and subsequent practice
* share the curriculum 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 professional development for teachers in ASD in the longer term.

Essential precursors to the development of training and materials included a number of mapping activities. These included undertaking a review of the literature regarding training for teachers in autism (Lessner Lištiaková & Preece, in press), a postal survey of specialist educators in these countries (Lisak et al., under review) and scrutiny of policy and training opportunities in Croatia, Poland and North Macedonia. In addition, to answer the research question *“what are specialist educators’ experiences of working with children on the autism spectrum in these countries”,* focus groups were held with such educators from both mainstream and special education settings between December 2018 and February 2019.

This presentation reports on the findings of these specialist educator focus groups. It provides new knowledge regarding teachers’ skills and confidence in including learners on the autism spectrum in education; explores barriers and potential facilitators to successful inclusion; and identifies teachers’ perceptions regarding their training and professional developmental needs in this area.

*Methods/methodology (up to 400 words)*

*Methodology and tool*

An exploratory case study methodology was adopted for the project, utilising a combined process and outcome evaluation methodology (Royse et al., 2009) comprising quantitative methods (mapping survey; pre-training, post-training and follow up questionnaires), qualitative methods (mapping focus group; post-training teacher interviews, trainer focus groups and trainer reflective diaries) and document analysis. The study complied with the British Educational Research Association’s Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2018). Ethical approval was obtained by the University of Northampton, the lead institution in the partnership.

The focus group tool was initially developed in English. Following ethical approval, it was translated into Croatian, Macedonian and Polish and piloted in November 2018. After piloting, minor changes were made to the interview tool.

The focus group interview schedule focused on obtaining insights into teachers’ perspectives regarding three key areas:

* issues and challenges that specialist teachers experience during their work with children with ASD
* methods they use in their work with children with ASD
* support, training and professional developmental opportunities required to facilitate their work with children on the autism spectrum.

*Sample*

Two focus groups were held in each country:

* Croatia: mainstream special needs coordinators (n=3); special education teachers (n=4).
* North Macedonia: specialist educators from mainstream schools (n=5) and from special schools (n=6).
* Poland: staff from an inclusive mainstream school (n=12) and special education staff undertaking postgraduate study (n=30).

Teachers’ experience ranged from those who had recently begun working as specialists in the field to 30 years. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

*Analysis*

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed in participants’ native languages and subjected to thematic qualitative analysis, using qualitative analysis software, by researchers in Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland. The coding scheme was developed collaboratively by members of the research team from all three countries plus the University of Northampton with the intent of formulating core codes relevant for the coding of all participant data across countries, as well as more locally pertinent codes in order to allow for the emergence - as appropriate - of locally significant themes. Analysis was checked for inter-coder reliability among all colleagues involved in the coding process.

*Results (up to 300 words)*

Analysis of the focus group data across the three countries identified similar themes and issues within both mainstream and special schools. Specialist educators in all settings were facing significant challenges in their daily work. Mainstream educators were often uncertain how to include children with autism in the classroom: what approaches and methods to use, how to support communication and social interaction with peers, and how to organise activities and the classroom/school environment to address the needs of all. School leaders often lacked understanding about autism, and effective collaboration with teaching assistants and effective working relationships with parents could be hard to achieve. Teachers in special school also spoke of their difficulties teaching children with autism in what were often challenging physical environments, the complex and multiple needs of the children in their classes, and the need to develop effective and positive relationships with other professionals and parents.

Managing challenging behaviour was identified as a key issue across both mainstream and special schools. Educators sought support in understanding and dealing with behavioural issues. Mainstream teachers particularly sought effective strategies to support pupils’ social skills development and group working, while those in special school settings highlighted needs regarding sensory issues, communication and assistive technology. Support regarding effective planning and assessment and the need for whole-school approaches that took account of the characteristics and learning styles of autism were also identified as key. Educators spoke of the need for more inclusive teaching approaches, encouraging parental participation in planning and activities and providing consistency to learners.

Overall, a need for training and professional development – not only regarding theory, but importantly focused on effective strategies to inform their teaching, assessment and classroom management – was identified across all groups. Policy development must go hand-in-hand with appropriate developmental opportunities to ensure the effectiveness of inclusive policies.

*Intent of publication*

It is intended that a journal article based on this presentation will be submitted to a peer-reviewed academic journal.

*References (400 words)*

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