

DEVELOPING TRAINING FOR TEACHERS TO SUPPORT THE INCLUSION IN EDUCATION OF PUPILS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER IN EASTERN EUROPE AND THE BALKANS

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Abstract

Introduction: *Autism is a lifelong developmental disorder, impacting approximately 1% of the population. Education has been identified as a key intervention for such children. However, due to the wide spectrum of autism, no single educational approach is appropriate for all, and teachers need a range of skills and strategies. Providing such education is challenging across Europe, and particularly so in Central/Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where previous research has identified a shortfall in training.*

Methodology: *This overall project is being carried out utilising a collaborative, action-based and stakeholder-empowering methodology, and is being undertaken in four overlapping phases. The training materials and the training process will be evaluated using a combined process and outcome evaluation methodology (Royse et al., 2016). This will include the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods.*

Results/Activity to date: *Project activity to date has focused on the mapping the 'state of the art' regarding existing models and practice regarding teacher education in ASD, as well as identifying the current knowledge, attitudes and training needs of teachers. Academics from the University of Northampton in the UK, the lead partner in the ASD-EAST project, have reviewed the literature regarding teacher education in ASD generally, while partners from Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland have led on reviewing local policy and practice on this topic.*

Conclusions: *Initial analysis of the mapping activity has demonstrated that teachers across all three countries lack knowledge about intervention and educational methods in autism, and that they have a strong desire for training regarding practical strategies that are applicable to their work settings. This identifies the value of the project, and suggests that such training could bring about positive change for teachers and learners alike.*

Key words: autism, education, trainings, special education and rehabilitation

Introduction

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 and 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 & mainstream education, with training being fragmented and often not informed by research (Marshall and 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.

Autism Spectrum Disorders: Empowering and Supporting Teachers (ASD-EAST)

ASD-EAST was therefore established to address this shortfall, and to focus on developing appropriate training to support effective teaching to ensure the inclusion of learners with ASD 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 the Republic of 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 supports 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 *Act of 7 September 1991 on the Educational System* (1991). 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 unites 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.

Methodology

This overall project is being carried out utilising a collaborative, action-based and stakeholder-empowering methodology, and is being undertaken in four overlapping phases:

- *Phase I:* Mapping activity (9/2018-3/2019)
- *Phase II:* Development of curriculum, programme and materials (1/2019 – 9/2019)
- *Phase III:* Training activity and evaluation (10/2019 – 3/2020)
- *Phase IV:* Dissemination and development of policy recommendations (2/2020-8/2020)

The training materials and the training process will be evaluated using a combined process and outcome evaluation methodology (Royse *et al.*, 2016). This will include the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

Quantitative methods

Twenty specialist teachers from mainstream/inclusive schools, and 20 teachers from special schools in each of the three countries will participate in training events in October/November 2019 – a total of six training events and 120 participants. Participants will be self-selecting. Pre-, post- and 3-month follow-up questionnaires will be distributed to all participants, gathering demographic data, data on knowledge and skills regarding ASD, data on their expectations of the

training (pre-training) and on what they have learned, their competence and confidence (post-training/follow-up) and implementation (follow-up)

Qualitative methods

Dimensional sampling will be used to identify four or five participants per training (n=24-30) to be interviewed three months after the training. Interviews will collect data regarding their understanding of autism and the education of children with autism, how they understand/conceptualise inclusion, their experience of the training and the impact (if any) of the training. Focus groups of local training teams in each of the three countries will also be held, to gather data regarding trainers' experiences, their views regarding the content and process and differentiation of the training and their perceptions regarding the participants' experiences/benefits for participants.

Results

Project activity to date has focused on the mapping the 'state of the art' regarding existing models and practice regarding teacher education in ASD, as well as identifying the current knowledge, attitudes and training needs of teachers. Academics from the University of Northampton in the UK, the lead partner in the ASD-EAST project, have reviewed the literature regarding teacher education in ASD generally, while partners from Croatia, North Macedonia and Poland have led on reviewing local policy and practice on this topic. To gather data from practicing teachers a structured questionnaire was developed in autumn 2018 by academic partners from Autism Macedonia Blue Firefly, the Pedagogical University of Krakow, the University of Zagreb and the University of Northampton. This tool collected data regarding teachers' knowledge and understanding of ASD, their attitudes towards different types of educational approaches in ASD (and the extent to which they are used), their confidence in addressing the educational needs of such children, and their evaluation of their own training needs.

The questionnaire was distributed to teachers between November 2018 and February 2019: in total 361 questionnaires were returned (Croatia = 140, North Macedonia = 81, Poland = 140). In addition, focus groups were carried out with teachers from special education and mainstream/inclusive settings from Krakow, Skopje and Zagreb in December.

Conclusions

At the time of writing (March 2019) the data collected have not been fully analysed. However, initial analysis has identified that the majority of teachers across all the three countries lack knowledge regarding intervention and educational methods in autism that have relevance in special educational and mainstream/inclusive settings, such as structured teaching, social stories and PECS. The data also identifies that an overwhelming majority of teachers in both special educational and mainstream/inclusive settings – approximately 90% - have a strong

desire for training regarding practical strategies that are applicable to their work settings.

These initial provisional findings identify the value of the project, and suggests that such training could bring about positive change for teachers and learners alike. More complete findings regarding the knowledge, attitudes and training needs of Macedonian teachers will be presented at the conference in May 2019.

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