



ASD-EAST

Autism Spectrum Disorder
Empowering And Supporting Teachers

RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE SPECIALIST TEACHING SUPPORT FOR AUTISM IN EUROPE



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AN ACUTE NEED FOR BETTER TEACHER TRAINING TO SUPPORT AUTISTIC LEARNERS IN EUROPE

Autism is a lifelong condition affecting approximately 1% of the population¹. The condition impacts all aspects of the individual's experience, including how they learn². Children and young people with autism 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, flexibility, and sensory processing. Meaningful access to effective education is crucial for autistic learners.

Due to the diverse nature of the autism spectrum, no single educational intervention is effective or appropriate for all, meaning teachers need a range of skills and strategies³. However, many teachers do not have access to appropriate training⁴. Educational provision for children with autism is unequal and inequitable, and though there are pockets of good practice, challenges exist regarding the skills, knowledge and expertise of educators working with autistic children across both special and mainstream educational settings⁵.

Against this background, the Autism Spectrum Disorder-Empowering and Supporting Teachers (ASD-EAST) partnership, led by the University of Northampton, have their core objectives to empower specialist teachers in Croatia, Poland and the Republic of North Macedonia to support the effective inclusion of children on the autism spectrum in education, providing teachers with appropriate skills, knowledge, effective strategies and locally appropriate training. A mapping survey of specialist teachers in the three countries, undertaken in the ASD-EAST project, identified low levels of previous training and confidence regarding many commonly-used educational methods in autism, and that many teachers, particularly in mainstream settings, held stereotypical views about autism. Of the 294 respondents who responded to the survey, 90% felt they would benefit from training, notably in relation to practical strategies.

Key training needs identified related to:

- Managing behaviours that challenge
- The adaptation of lessons and the school environment
- The guidance in relation to the inclusion of autistic children.

These gaps were addressed in the ASD-EAST pilot training, and teachers who benefited from it reported high satisfaction rates.

- ✓ Over 93% of the 259 teachers stated that the training gave them methods and strategies they could use straight away.
- ✓ Almost 92% indicated they would recommend the training to colleagues.

This feedback confirms the benefits of addressing practical training needs in relation to autism.

¹ Baird et al, 2006 ² Dawson et al, 2008 ³ Iovannone et al, 2003

⁴ Morrier et al, 2011 ⁵ Charman et al, 2011; Daly & Ring, 2016; Jones et al, 2008; Sekušak-Galešev et al, 2015

A LEGAL OBLIGATION TO ENSURE ACCESS TO EDUCATION

At the international level, the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action⁶ established the idea of inclusive education requiring education programmes to be designed to reflect the unique characteristics and the diverse needs of all learners. The United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with a Disability⁷ has provisions in relation to education and provides guidance on how to achieve inclusive education from the perspective of meeting the needs of all pupils. All of the EU member states, as well as the EU itself, have ratified the UNCRPD. The convention outlines in ‘Article 24: Education,’ the importance of specialist teacher training, and what that training should entail in more detail;

“[...] Such training shall incorporate disability awareness and the use of appropriate augmentative and alternative modes, means and formats of communication, educational techniques and materials to support persons with disabilities.”

Moreover, the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), in particular SDG4 Quality Education, highlights the necessity to “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”. This can only be achieved when general and specialist teachers are properly trained to deal with the specificities of disability, such as the specific needs of autistic learners.

At the EU level, in “Chapter I: Equal opportunities and access to the labour market’ of the European Pillar of Social Rights, it outlines that ‘everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning in order to maintain and acquire skills that enable them to participate fully in society and manage successfully transitions in the labour market”.

ASD-EAST was established to address the lack of adequate training for specialist teachers, in Croatia, Poland and the Republic of North Macedonia in a context where education policies have been evolving in the region in recent years.

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

- Croatia’s National Strategy for Education Science and Technology (2014)
- The Republic of North Macedonia’s Laws on Primary Education (2019)
- Poland’s Ordinance on the Conditions for Organizing Education, Upbringing and Care for Disabled Children and Youth (2017).

In addition, it addresses pan-European policy and goals such as Empowering Teachers to Promote Inclusive Education⁸, Inclusive Education for Learners with Disabilities⁹ and a smart, sustainable and inclusive growth that will contribute to the Europe 2020 objectives¹⁰.



⁶ UNESCO, 1994 ⁷ UNCRPD, 2007 ⁸ European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2015

⁹ European Parliament, 2017 ¹⁰ Erasmus+ programme Guide, 2019

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Ensure appropriate Initial Training, Continuing Professional Development and support for teachers
2. Ensure that accurate understanding of autism and individualisation of learning and teaching are central to the training
3. Have a holistic approach, and work effectively with families

ASD-EAST strongly recommends EU Member States to ensure the development of effective specialist teacher training to respond to the support needs of autistic learners across Europe, in line with the project's findings.

Specialist teacher training is an effective way to contribute to better outcomes for learners as well as to improve their quality of life, and inclusion in society. Public authorities and other relevant stakeholders should therefore ensure that adequate resources and funding are dedicated to this issue as investing in education will have a significant impact on the outcomes of autistic learners, reduce school dropout and improve their employment prospects.

1. Ensure appropriate Initial Training, Continuing Professional Development and support for teachers

ASD-EAST recommends the development of appropriate initial and advanced training, including practical and field-based experiences, as well as access to current research and best practice teaching strategies.



“I especially liked that the trainers worked out the topics by sharing practical examples and personal experiences in working with children with ASD.”

(Special educator, Republic of North Macedonia).

“I liked the content and organization of the workshop, with a large dose of practical tips and a wide range of recommended literature.”

(Mainstream teacher, Poland).



Emphasis should be placed on updating specialist knowledge and refreshing practice with respect to teachers' experience enhancing their competence and confidence. Training in autism should be provided on an ongoing basis so that all teachers are empowered to work with learners on the spectrum.

“The sessions about challenging behaviour and social stories were most useful for me. I have learnt new things although I have a lot of years of experience. It was a good balance between theory and practice. It would be great if some topics could be covered in more depth.”

(Special educator in autism class, Croatia)

“After being reminded about useful strategies that I'd forgotten, I feel more confident about working with children with ASD.”

(Special educator, Poland)

To develop a community of practice, sharing knowledge across local teachers and school networks as well as regional educational networks, ASD-EAST recommends:

- Creating autism ambassadors' networks to promote continuous improvement, monitor quality, to lead on the development of good practice in schools and offer mutual support.
- Developing mentoring schemes, particularly to support less-experienced teachers.

2. Ensure that accurate understanding of autism and individualisation of learning and teaching are central to the training

ASD-EAST found that it is essential to enable teachers to understand autistic thinking and learning across the spectrum of ability and gender.

ASD-EAST recommends that emphasis should be placed on the approach in that 'understanding comes before the methods'. Putting the emphasis on individualisation is key to ensuring the specific needs of each autistic learner are met.

“Every child is an individual specific to himself or herself in a special way. In order to be successful in my work, I have to unravel the individual potential that every child has to offer, to find their way of learning. need to be careful at observing, quite patient, flexible, creative and well informed.”
(Emilija Zafirova Petkov, Special Educator involved in ASD-EAST, Republic of North Macedonia)

ASD-EAST recommends that practical, evidence-based strategies are to be employed to support curriculum access and social inclusion. Teachers should be trained in a range of appropriate eclectic strategies to cater for the diversity of the profiles and the learners' needs, as there is not one-size-fits-all method of learning.



“From the strategies we were shown, I started using emotion recognition and dramatization, peer involvement, role playing.” (Mainstream teacher, Republic of North Macedonia).

“I applied principles of self-regulation with one of the pupils in my school. I work with him individually and when he returned to the classroom he was better able to regulate his own behaviour.”
(Mainstream teacher, Croatia)

“The materials will support me to apply the strategies and adapt them to meet individual needs.”
(Special educator, Poland)



3. Have a holistic approach, and work effectively with families

Beyond teachers and educational staff, ASD-EAST recommends a general improvement to the level of knowledge and training on autism. All staff coming in contact with the children during the day (bus drivers, canteen staff, janitors) working in education, health and social care settings – and parents (ESIPP, 2018) should be adequately trained to support the social inclusion of people on the autism spectrum.

Ensuring adequate collaboration and communication between parents and professionals is key to address any issues that may arise and to foster parental participation in the educational process. It is also important to streamline and improve methods of communication between departments and professionals, keeping parents continually informed.

The most important thing is cooperation with parents and inside the teaching staff.”
(Mainstream teacher, Poland)

“I feel empowered to work on the socio-emotional skills of pupils and to work better with parents – although we could use more support on that too. I use practical skills for emotional regulation every day in my work.” (Mainstream teacher, Croatia)

The work of the ASD-EAST project asserts that putting these key recommendations into place will ensure teachers across Europe are better able to meet the needs of their children and fulfil the European countries legal obligations in regarding inclusion and the rights of people with disabilities.

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