transform autism education

ERASMUS PLUS

KA2: COOPERATION AND INNOVATION FOR GOOD PRACTICES

Transform Autism Education | Final Report

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ENHANCING SKILLS, KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHERS
3 year research and development project

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Transform Autism Education (TAE) project[1] focused on the domain of 'good autism practice' in the education of pupils with autism in the UK, Greece and Italy with the overall objectives to:

- Research good autism practice in education.
- Create professional development programmes in Greece and Italy.
- Enhance the knowledge and practice of school staff.
- Facilitate the inclusion of autistic children in primary schools in those countries.

Funded by the European Commission through Erasmus Plus Key Action 2, Strategic Partnerships scheme, and led by Principal Investigator Dr. Karen Guldberg, the project involved a range of Greek, Italian and UK partners. It employed the Autism Education Trust (AET) collaborative training schemes in the UK as a founding model. While the requirements of each country were distinct, and so necessitated careful adaptations of the materials to their specific needs, what united all aspects of the project was a desire to improve the educational inclusion of autistic children, as well as their general experiences in school and their outcomes.

Specifically, Transform Autism Education created three levels of training in autism education for school staff in Italy and four levels of training in autism education for school staff and therapists in Greece. In addition, the project developed a set of Quality Indicators for self-evaluation by settings and a Competency Framework to enable professionals to plan their Continuous Professional Development in Greece and Italy. Project members also developed a trilingual public website with educational resources for practitioners: http://www.transformautismeducation.org. This was launched internationally and has had engagement from a wide audience of people from a range of countries.

Starting in 2014 and running over three years, the TAE project has traversed several stages, such as the underpinning research, piloting of training materials and the launch of the resource-based website, and it has included a number of international meetings in Greece, Italy and the UK. These incorporated a range of academic and practical activities, including conferences during which information about the project was shared with teachers, researchers and parents.

'Transform Autism Education' used communities of practice theory and a participatory methodology to inform the collaborative and participatory working practices of the project. The partners developed all materials in partnership with autistic individuals, expert reference groups, regional authority staff and teachers. Through an iterative developmental approach involving feedback from training deliverers and other stakeholders throughout the creation of the materials, the project team ensured that all content was clear and accessible, and relevant

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to the local educational context and practitioners in partner countries. Nearly 1,600 school staff in Greece and 200 staff in Italy received the training.

Evaluations indicate that the training and the website materials show sensitivity to the local and national delivery context and provide the basis for further organic development. The project has impacted on the team members themselves, on school and therapeutic staff in Italy and Greece, and it has led to practitioners enhancing their practice in meeting the needs of autistic pupils. The work has resulted in a sustainable model of good autism practice in partner countries and has made a contribution to local, national and international knowledge, skills and experience. The project has therefore had positive effects on the participant organisations and policy systems as well as on the individuals directly or indirectly involved in the project. Project results have been disseminated widely through social media, publications, reports, conferences and workshops.

2. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROJECT

The Transform Autism Education project promoted equity and inclusion in autism education by enhancing the skills, knowledge and understanding of teachers and other school staff who work with children aged 5-10. The objectives of this project were to cohere a strategic partnership of researchers, policy and practitioner organisations in the UK, Greece and Italy to:

i) research educational practices in the vocational education and training (VET) of teachers who work with children with autism aged between 5 and 10;

ii) develop the skills, knowledge and understanding of educational professionals in each country;

iii) adapt a UK professional development programme in a manner that enables the development of ecologically valid materials for educational contexts and standards of practice in Greece and Italy;

iv) create a framework for international collaboration and a method of delivery that can be applied to other countries to research/evaluate and develop their own educational practice in autism and

v) create a website with Open Educational Resources developed by the project to support the education of children with autism internationally.

All these original objectives of the project were met.

Transform Autism Education consisted of six partners, including Universities, non profit organisations, a school district and a private creative agency. Partners worked together through planned regular communications and activities such as project meetings; seminars, conferences, workshops and expert reference groups, and with policy makers and practitioners in each partner country, to jointly develop and deliver a range of training resources.

The project drew on the experience and expertise developed through the creation of the Autism Education Trust (AET) partnership programme, which is the largest ever face-to-face autism training scheme for schools across England. The AET programme was developed through an innovative partnership model, in which a number of organisations worked together to develop a shared ethos and a vision for autism education, which linked the public, private and voluntary sector together. It received excellent evaluation, with clear evidence of enhancing the knowledge, understanding and practice of autism practitioners.

The methods for reaching the objectives of the Transform Autism Education project were based on adapting and translating the materials created in the UK, as well as the lessons learnt from the above AET partnership, and by developing close team work in translating the UK training materials to Greek and Italian, with UK team members advising on the process. Materials were developed and reviewed through an iterative process of team members working together

and eliciting feedback from the expert reference groups in each country, and in particular by consulting with autistic individuals in the creation of materials. After a process of review, the training materials were piloted in each country and were piloted by local teams.

Feedback from this stage informed the further development of the materials. Having concluded the adjustment of the training materials, the teams delivered the training, with participants evaluating each training session and team members improving the training accordingly. Evaluations from participants indicated that the educational programme was worthwhile, of high standard, with an appropriate balance of theoretical information and practical advice and resources. Participants reported that they were now more able to support children with autism, and that the training affected their everyday practice. As a result of the training, schools and practitioners have requested further collaboration with the partner organisations.

To support the work with schools, the Italian team developed a set of quality indicators for setting and guidelines for practitioners in Italy. In Greece, partners developed a model that included follow-up mentoring with schools. The Greek partners also developed a set of quality indicators to support schools to develop whole-school practice, and a competency framework to guide individual staff in Greece.

A sustainable model for continuing to develop the training has been developed in both countries. In Greece, the Laskaridou Foundation will continue to deliver the training in the year ahead. In Italy, the Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and Ufficio Scolastico, Monza and Brianza will continue to deliver the training by extending their work to more hubs.

2.2. Innovation

The project was innovative in five key ways. This included:

i) The way in which the professional development programme was underpinned by research.
ii) The strong participatory methodology and the involvement of autistic individuals in all three countries.
iii) The collaborative working practices.
iv) The development of a sustainable model of delivery that can be helpful to people in other countries.
v) The methodology for evaluating the work of the team.

2.2.1.Underpinned by research

The development of the training was informed by underpinning research. Before the development of the training materials, current educational practices in Greece and Italy were investigated. This included investigation of legislation on special needs and its current application; study of current practices in educational settings and the identification of attitudes about inclusion and the training needs of individuals working with students with autism. Findings from this informed both the content of the training and the method of delivery.

2.2.2. Participatory methodology and the involvement of autistic individuals

The inclusion of autistic people in the programme offered a new perspective for the understanding of autism in the Greek and Italian contexts, with the hope that it will be the beginning of active involvement of members of the autistic community in issues that concern their support and inclusion. In the UK, Damian Milton, an autistic adult, worked on the project and he was instrumental in supporting the whole team to consider how to effectively involve other autistic people in the project. Damian was employed by University of Birmingham and he attended all transnational meetings, as well as other events, having a high profile as a speaker and participant.

In Greece, one adult with autism participated in the programme. She reviewed all the material and offered her opinion, she attended two transnational meetings, took part in one multiplier event, but mostly, offered her clear views and helped the team to see through the perspective of a person with autism. Other members of the autistic community in Greece also offered their support and help in the programme. This included autistic individuals and parents giving interviews that were recorded and used in the training material. In Italy, an autistic adult provided feedback on materials and participated in the expert reference group as well as present at the final conference.

2.2.3.The collaborative working practices and the input from a number of stakeholders

The creation of the professional development programmes focused on the dual goals of drawing upon a strong evidence base for the content and ensuring that the materials represent and embody clear notions of what constitutes effective educational practice for pupils with autism. Thus we gave practitioners, families and individuals with autism the opportunity to shape the development of training programmes in a way that made those relevant and accessible to them whilst researchers gained the opportunity to develop their knowledge base by understanding the concerns and practices of practitioners, and learning to apply complex research findings to practice in an accessible way.

This community of practice approach played a highly effective role in enabling effective project implementation. It represented a shift away from traditional conceptions of knowledge transfer (from the researchers to the practitioners) and even knowledge exchange (reciprocity between researchers and practitioners) towards a much more shared and collaborative endeavour in which knowledge and outcomes were developed with practitioners through a process of knowledge co-creation.

2.2.4. The development of a sustainable model of delivery

The TAE project team was committed from the outset to the development of a sustainable model of delivery so that the project could continue after the EU funding was finished. This was achieved and the training programme continues to be delivered in Greece and Italy, whilst the website is being maintained in Greece, Italy and the UK.

2.2.5.Methodology for evaluation

In addition to evaluations of transnational meetings and multiplier events, the project used the

Value Creation Framework to evaluate the outcomes of the project. This framework represents a mixed methods evaluation, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative data. The use of value creation stories was particularly important to the team, in providing team members and other participants with the opportunity to reflect on their own learning during the course of the project, as well as the ability to identify the key learning moments, and the most powerful learning activities of the project.

3. INTELLECTUAL OUTPUTS

The project developed the following intellectual outputs:

- A research report on the training needs of school staff in the UK, Greece and Italy.
- Four tiers of training materials in Greece.
- Three tiers of training materials in Italy.
- A set of guidelines for school staff for Italy.
- A set of quality indicators for Greece
- A competency framework for practitioners in Greece.
- A sustainable collaborative training model for Greece and Italy.
- A website with open access resources for school staff in Greek, Italian and English.

IO1: State of the Art reports for UK, Italy and Greece

We completed a state of the art report for the UK, Greece and Italy. These reports were based upon research and review of current autism educational practices and policies in each country. The studies were run in Phase One in all three countries based on a design using a mixed methods approach of surveys, focus groups and interviews. This provided evidence-based policy recommendations for the respective countries. The UK report included a description and analysis of the development and delivery of the AET programme, with recommendations for practice and policies of other countries. For the Greek and Italian partners, the outcomes from this review examined the implications for developing, adapting, and translating the

quality indicators and the training materials to their respective contexts. Importantly, these reports provided clear indications of the need to develop evidence-based professional development programmes in autism for teachers. The reports also provided evidence for the type of professional development needed by teachers.

As part of the overall 'state of the art' phase one report, the Italian research team led a study in the Monza Brianza area to assess the *status quo* of educational inclusion in primary school of students on the autism spectrum, mainly focusing on present practices and teachers' needs. The study was carried out through questionnaires, focus groups and interviews to professionals and the results showed that:

- The key factor of educational inclusion for pupils with autism is training for teachers, and this was a strong need of the teachers in the network.
- Training processes should be based on the trainees' specific interests and knowledge, through a *learning* by doing approach, with flexible strategies. The process must be culturally and contextually relevant, with pedagogic guidelines that can be applied in and by the schools themselves.

Furthermore, the participants expressed the need to monitor the daily effects of their training on the educational inclusion of students on the autism spectrum. The teachers' training must go hand in hand with their daily experiences so that they can mutually enrich each other by establishing links between research and practice on the ground. The above results were crucial in informing the adaptation and translation of the AET training programme and phase two of the project to the Italian context.

In Greece, the underlying research was also accomplished using three different data collection techniques:

- the administration of a questionnaire;
- the interviewing of experts;
- the discussion with expert groups.

Participants in the Greek study came from different backgrounds: teachers in mainstream schools, teachers and specialists such as speech therapists and occupational therapists working in special needs schools, school directors from mainstream and special needs schools, specialists working in outreach centres offering interventions for children with autism, such as psychologists, speech therapists and occupational therapists, members from the academic community, and child psychiatrists with particular interest in autism.

The results of this investigation were also presented in the Phase One report. Interestingly, a lot of the professionals who participated believed that mainstream class teachers are not responsible for the education of children with autism when the latter are educated in mainstream schools. This finding also has been reported in the literature and has been attributed to the fact that the responsibility for implementing inclusion in Greece has fallen

on 'expert' professionals such as special education teachers and related professionals. It became clear from all the findings that there is a great need for training in order to support teachers to implement truly inclusive practices and the findings from this report informed the development of the training programme for the Greek context.

The Phase One report for all three countries was crucial in enabling team members to understand how inclusion was implemented differently in the three different countries, and it enhanced team members' and other stakeholders ability to reflect on and discuss the different policy contexts, as well as the different ways in which inclusion was implemented. This provided vital learning and contextual information, which was complemented by school visits and seeing inclusion in practice in the three different countries. The work of this phase focused team members very carefully on what teachers needed in the respective countries, and therefore ensured that the development of the training programmes were i) informed by research; ii) based on local, contextual and cultural realities and iii) delivered in a way which was welcomed by school staff, with a pedagogic approach that suited participants.

IO2: Adaptation and translation of training materials to Greek and Italian at three/four levels.

This intellectual output consists of the adaptation and translation of training materials to Greek and Italian. The materials were designed on Powerpoint templates, with the Transform Autism Education logo. Images and designs were developed to represent the ethos and values of the project. They represent a novel pedagogical approach and a mixture of materials that include video clips; case studies and vignettes; interactive activities and a number of resources that can be helpful in the classroom. The materials were developed in partnership with the expert reference group and by consulting with a person with autism in each country. Teachers also contributed feedback through the expert reference groups in each country.

In ***Italy,*** **Level One** consists of 48 slides and is an awareness raising level which consists of three hours of training materials, and it aims to reach all school staff including dinner ladies, teachers, assistants and administrators. **Level Two** consists of four sessions of 26 slides each and represents four sessions of training for 12 hours in total (three hours a session): Level Two can be delivered in two or more days, depending on the organisation. It focuses on practical strategies and approaches for school staff who work directly with pupils with autism. **Level Three** consists of 30 slides. It represents three hours of training and is designed to support participants with a leadership role to review issues together, to select and develop resources for their setting and to start to plan a new community of practice able to face challenges and goals. This level is run as a focus group.

In ***Greece,*** **Level One** consists of 35 slides and is an awareness raising level which consists of two-three hours of training materials, and it aims to reach all school staff including dinner ladies, teachers, assistants and administrators. **Level Two** consists of 150 slides and represents eight hours of training to be delivered over one or more days (within a two week period) according to the needs of each setting. It focuses on practical strategies and approaches

for school staff who work directly with pupils with autism. Two versions of the **Level Three** materials (200 and 230 slides each to be delivered in eight-ten hours in one or more sessions) were created for two different audiences: teachers who have completed Level Two training plus supervision/mentoring and want to take a leadership role in their setting. The second version of Level Three materials is aimed at experienced professionals working in multidisciplinary centers and who are interested in becoming trainers. A fourth set of materials (160 slides or eight hours of training) were also developed using slides from Level Two and Three to address the training needs of Head teachers and school counsellors.

One major change therefore concerned the number of training levels that were developed in that the Greek team developed four training levels. The Level One training was developed for personnel of mainstream schools: teachers, PE trainers, cleaning personnel and so on. The Level Two training was developed for teachers of mainstream or special needs schools that are interested in gaining a more detailed insight of autism. Level Three training has two versions: one for head teachers and school counsellors and a second version for specialists that work in private centres that offer interventions for children with autism. Currently in Greece, most of the support of children with autism is provided not within school settings but in specialized centres that offer after-school interventions. It was thus considered necessary to address the training material to the practitioners of such centres. However the training material needed adjustments as it would be addressed to people who were specialists, such as occupational and speech therapists, psychologists and special needs teachers. The second version of Level Three was developed in order to address the particular needs of practitioners that are already familiar with autism interventions.

In both Italy and Greece, changes in the training material included the addition of case reports, of activities that involved the participation of the audience, the development of short films with interviews with autistic people and their families from the local community, interviews of teachers and Head Teachers. Furthermore, material for the visual support of students with autism was included in the training, as well as examples of adjustments of the school curriculum.

IO3: Report on evaluation and quality assurance *processes*

This intellectual output consists of a report on the evaluation and training materials in Greece and Italy and key points are summarised here. We amalgamated the reports related to Intellectual Outputs Three and Four as they were so closely interrelated with one another and benefited from being presented in one overall report.

Monitoring and controlling the quality of the training process is an essential step to evaluate it, since it allows both trainers and trainees to gather information on the training in terms of effectiveness and satisfaction, and to identify critical points. The main aim of quality controls is to allow reviews along the way and improve methodology and contents.

The development of the training programme underwent an inner quality audit based on a three-pronged approach:

1) Preparing materials and the classroom for the training (before the training).
2) Development of the training methods and style (during the training).
3) Feedback from the trainees (after the training).

1. Preparing materials and the classroom for the training

The first step was a detailed and analytical review of the AET programme materials to be used. Such critical review was fundamental to understanding how to adapt the materials to the Italian and Greek school systems, selecting the right content, deleting inappropriate topics and adding relevant context-related information that was lacking in the original version.

Editing the contents of the training allowed partner organisations to understand how to organise the training, in terms of setting, timing and methodology. Translations were then carried out over a period of time with feedback from the expert reference groups in each country. This stage included the creation of video-interviews of professionals, parents and autistic people in the field of autism, coupled with a thorough revision of the training programme and the production of a draft for the pilot phase. Both teams introduced major changes to the training materials. This included changes in content as well as images, and content. The slides very carefully focused on the needs of local professionals and their relevant training needs, as identified in Phase One of the project. Activity slides were adapted the needs of Greek and Italian teachers.

2. Development of training methods and style

During the training, we followed this procedure for quality controls:

- In Level Two in Italy, we appointed two different trainers (two meetings each) in order to minimise the impact of different training styles and to verify how the trainees would perceive such a difference, even in terms of contents. However, the participants did not notice huge differences in the trainers' styles and mainly underlined differences in the use of training tools.
- In Level One and Two, the Italian team introduced a twofold quality check, with one observer from CeDisMa and five teachers from the Local Board of Education for each training session; all of them had received hard copies of the materials. Their main job was to check time-effectiveness, verify contents and methodology, on the basis of the trainees' assessment. The presence of these observers proved itself very useful, since it was possible to immediately intervene on timing and methodology issues. The observers submitted their feedback immediately after each training session.
- In Level Three, the Italian team appointed external observers who adopted a different reporting system, due to the different methodology and style of Level Three itself. Level Three consisted of one single training session, without slides. The trainees took part in a round table and collected their ideas on a flipchart, it was therefore not necessary to equip the observers with any specific materials for observation. They were mainly asked to evaluate the quality of the training, the trainees involvement and the effectiveness of the dialogic communication.

- In Greece, the training was delivered collaboratively, with two members of the team presenting the training. In some exceptions, either three members delivered together or one member delivered alone. Once the members of the team felt confident, two new trainers were included in the team: the new trainers were teachers that had attended all three training Levels and had already some experience in working with students with autism.

3. Feedback from the trainees

After each training level, trainees were asked to fill in a satisfaction survey, translated and adapted from the AET model. The surveys were translated and adapted to Greek and Italian and evaluations were also undertaken of pilot training. The surveys, all having the same structure, were articulated according to the complexity of each level and were divided into these sections:

1) The first part about general information on the trainee (school, role, previous knowledge of autism and knowledge acquired after the training).
2) The second part about the training setting (classroom) and materials.
3) The third part – the most extensive one – focused on the effectiveness of the methodology, the tools and the experience in general, referring to each session of the training levels (one for Level One and Three, four for Level Two).
4) The final part concerning training in general and further suggestions for the research team.

All surveys were anonymous and submitted at the end of each session.

In Greece, for example, evaluations from participants indicated that the training enabled them to understand the needs of pupils with autism better, as well as how to adapt the environment, the way they communicate with students with autism and how to understand the behaviour of students with autism better. Some participants in all sessions believed that the training could be separated into more sessions and participants in the Level Three training believed there should be more time for discussion and less information.

IO4: Report on delivery and assessment of the training.

This consists of a report on the delivery and assessment of the training describing the implementation, the phases, the participants and evaluations. As stated above, Intellectual Outputs three and four were amalgamated. Pilot training was an essential part of the quality assurance and evaluation process and changes were implemented as a result of feedback from this. In Italy, pilot training sessions took place on 5th December 2015 with 95 participants; 11th January- 3rd February 2016 with 35 participants and March 2016 with 25 participants. Feedback from the expert reference groups was implemented after pilot training and key feedback indicated that the way to deliver the content was to promote competence and a community of practice and that it was also very important to keep attention to the timing and the talking activity of participants. This feedback was incorporated into changes to the main training materials, and the main training was delivered on 17 June (Level One), 20 – 22 June (Level Two), and 24 June (Level Three). Over 200 participants received the training.

In Greece, pilot training sessions took place on 3/2/2016 (Level One), with 14 people attending;

5/3/2016 for Level Two with a total of 24 people attending (including 7 teachers in mainstream schools, three working as parallel support, two working as teachers in a resource base, one head teacher and one teacher in a special school), Level Two/Three for Head teachers and school counsellors on 20/3/2016 with 15 people attending and Level Three for professionals working in multidisciplinary centers on the 22/3 & 29/3 with 14 people attending (including seven psychologists, two speech therapists, three occupational therapists & others). Feedback from the expert reference groups was again implemented for the main training and key feedback indicated that trainers should pay careful attention to deciding which activities and which slides to emphasise according to the needs of the audience rather than trying to carry out all activities and show all slides. In addition, all levels were followed up by a second session for support on applying and/or individualising the principles learnt. This feedback was incorporated into changes to the main training materials.

In Greece, up till the end of June 2017, 110 schools had attended the training and the staff of three outreach autism intervention centres had too. Twenty eight trainings had been delivered, to a total number of 1534 participants. Out of twenty-eight trainings, twenty were Level One training, four were Level Two, three were Level Three for head masters and school counsellors and one was Level Three for outreach centres. The length of Level One training is three hours with one break, while the length of Level Two and Level Three is eight hours – delivered in one day with two breaks or in two different days.

In Italy, evaluations from participants indicated that this type of training was very new to them: they had the chance to build their competence through all the three levels, thanks to being given time to talk, to work, to think and to listen. Participants raised their knowledge and awareness on autism and inclusion, the topics and tools presented during the training were found very useful to increase the quality of inclusion not only for pupils on the spectrum but for every child, in particular with Special Educational Needs.

- In Level One, 75% of trainees agreed on having had the possibility to improve their knowledge on the topic and 98% considered the training adequate to their level.
- In Level Two, 95% of trainees admitted having increased their knowledge on the topic and 97% considered the training adequate to their level. The trainees expressed full satisfaction about the contents, the basic topics, the activities and the possibility to share their ideas. Furthermore, the trainees underlined the importance and need to share their own experiences through open dialogue and asked to be allowed more time to do so. They appreciated the setting up of the room in working groups. They also suggested increasing the number of follow-up sessions, even if the results of the survey might show scarce relevance of this aspect, mainly due to the fact that the trainees themselves judged these sessions too short. Not all participants considered the videos useful training tools, whereas many highlighted the importance of increasing the number of activities proposed during the training.
- In Level Three, the trainees confirmed the usefulness of the training, the adequacy of the setting, the relevance of the topics as well as the benefits of the training itself on their working life.

In Greece, analysis of feedback from the training of the first 340 participants (54% response rate to the questionnaire) found that they found the training worthwhile. Similarly most participants found that the programme was of high standard. Only 2.7% was neutral and 0.5% responded that they did not find the programme of high standard. Eighty-eight percent of the participants agreed or completely agreed that the programme was appropriate for the level of their knowledge. Similarly 84% found that there was a good balance between theoretical information, explanatory example and practice analysis. The chosen videos were considered good and helpful by the majority of the participants, as were the printed handouts. Most participants responded positively about feeling able to help others understand autism. The majority agreed that the training programme would change their everyday practice and would recommend the training programme to others.

IO5: Website with Open Educational Resources.

Intellectual output five is the website with Open Educational Resources. This website sits alongside the training materials, quality indicators and competencies and consists of collated resources emerging from the project. The URL for the website is:

http://www.transformautismeducation.org

The two key aims of the website are to:

1. Promote the training courses developed by the Transform Autism Project in Italy and Greece.
2. Support schools and all practitioners working with primary aged children with autism in the effective use of resources to meet their needs* and to promote effective teaching and learning
   **meaning social, emotional, sensory, language/communication, independence, functional and academic needs.*

The audience for the website is as follows:

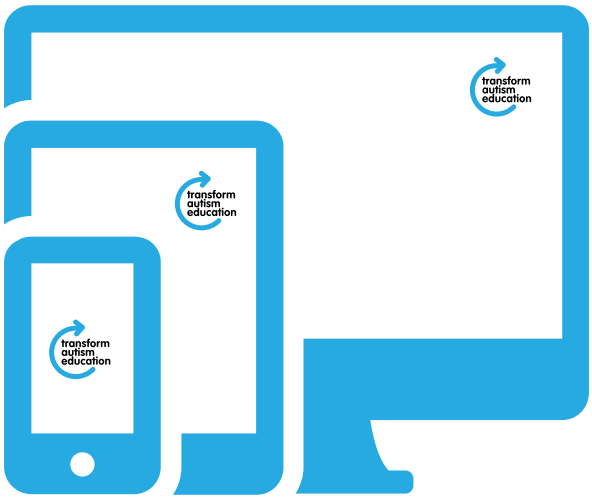
- **Italy** - educational professionals e.g. teachers and support staff, who work with Primary aged children with autism.
- **Greece** - this includes the same group as Italy but also speech and occupational therapists, psychologists and psychiatrists who work in the outpatient centres.
- **UK** – educational and health professionals e.g. teachers, support staff, SALTs and OTs, who work with Primary aged children with autism.

The website was created with sustainability in mind. We wanted it to be developed so that team members and others would be able to maintain it after the project was finished. Training of a group of team members was therefore built into the development of the website itself and was delivered by Genium Creatives, who also designed the website. The vision was that it should be relatively straight-forward for non-technical people to maintain the website and upload materials to it and that it could therefore be sustained after the project end date. Team members have been mentored by Genium Creatives to gain the skills to do this and the process has been very successful.

The process

The website was developed by a team of seven people from all three countries based on a process of i) setting goals; ii) determining the audience and iii) considering the user journey. A draft development document outlining the process for website was written. This followed the steps outlined below:

1. **Set Goals** – a maximum of three clear goals we want the website to achieve.
2. **Audience** – determine who we want to access and use the website.
3. **User Journey** – this was based on the first two steps and was a plan for how people using the website will experience it.
4. **Site Map** – this was a planning tool to develop the structure and design of the website.
5. **Design** – this included the design of the home page, template pages, and coding design.
6. **Testing period** – this period focused on checking the functionality, user journey and design of the website.
7. **Rights** – key team members were given differing levels of access to the website e.g. authorship or editorship writes to enable them to add or change content.
8. **Training** – key team members were trained to add or change content to the website.
9. **Soft Launch** – a selected number of people will be invited to pilot the website.
10. **Hard Launch** – the website went fully public.



The hard launch for the website was on World Autism Acceptance Day which was Sunday April 2nd 2017. The Italian and Greek teams decided on a pre-launch strategy using existing networks to publicise the website. The website was further publicised at the final transnational meeting in Italy in June 2017. The website continues to be used by the Greek and Italian teams to publicise their training and to upload new resources. The UK team's sustainability strategy is tied in with setting up a social enterprise through which we can resource staffing to support maintaining and further developing the website.

IO6: Translation and adaptation of quality indicators for settings and a competency framework for individual practitioners.

The quality indicators and competencies framework for settings are based on translating and adapting the UK National Standards and Competency Frameworks and are available on the AET website (see autismeducationtrust.org.uk). Instead of using the term National Standards, we have used the term quality indicators for this work. This represents a framework that

outlines the features of good autism practice at the level of the school and other settings. Hence it focuses on how schools can adapt their environments, how they can address the knowledge levels of their staff, and what their ethos and approach is to supporting pupils with autism, for example. This framework is now used widely in schools in the UK, to support the development of schools in the School Development Plans.

The competency framework, on the other hand, is a framework for individual school staff and it focuses on the skills, knowledge and understanding required of staff who work with autistic pupils. Hence this can help individual practitioners identify which areas of their knowledge, understanding and practice they might need to develop further. It can also support practitioners to identify their own training and support needs and can provide the basis for an action plan or be used in supervision with line managers.

The Greek Standards and Competencies were mainly based on the respective AET Standards and Competencies. The AET Standards and Competencies were translated and few changes were made in the Greek version. The changes mainly concerned the resources: the team tried to link items from the Standards and Competencies with Greek resources, wherever that was possible. Another change concerned the Greek cultural context: teachers in Greece are not familiar with self-evaluation tools and the team decided to simplify the Standards by not including the details of evidence. The Standards and Competencies have been uploaded on the Greek website. Furthermore the team is seeking ways to use the Standards and Competencies in a versatile way and is considering paying visits to schools that have attended the training, and as part of a follow-up, familiarise the teachers with the material and self-evaluation.

In Italy, teachers are not used to using standards or competencies either, so the Italian team decided to produce a set of guidelines for teachers and quality indicators for settings.

IO7: Final report on development of training materials, website, quality indicators and competencies.

This consists of a final report on the development of the work of the team, including the training materials, the website, the quality indicators and the competencies. The report pulls together the lessons learnt from the work undertaken by the project, with a focus on developing a framework for the development of sustainable programmes of similar nature in other countries.

IO8: Publication

Each partner has prepared a publication in its own national language on the project, describing the implementation, the outcomes and the good educational practice implications for practitioners and teachers that work with pupils with autism. The project team has published a chapter in a book and papers in peer review academic journals. This includes two published papers in Italy; two papers have been submitted to journals in the UK and one paper submitted has been submitted about the Greek work. A book chapter is in press.

Short online articles and newsletters related to the project have also been written for a variety of outlets. This has included a case study about the project was written for the UK HE sector International Unit- European Higher Education Funding Bulletin; and to the 'Share- practice, knowledge and innovation', Scottish Autism's brochure:

http://www.scottishautism.org/about-autism/centre-for-practice-innovation/share-blog-issue-1/

Other examples of articles are:

Perspectives Magazine: Autism Awareness or Acceptance – What Difference does it Make?
http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/perspective/autism-awareness.aspx

Birmingham Brief: Is it all about Funding? Lessons on autism inclusion from a school in Greece.
The Birmingham Brief is sent to select committees in the UK parliament and is also circulated to national journalists.
http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/thebirminghambrief/items/2017/03/autism-inclusion.aspx

The work of the CeDisMa team has featured in ten newspaper articles, and eight newsletters. The Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation has featured the project in their newsletter in April 2016.

4. PROJECT MANAGEMENT

4.1. Indicators of achievement

Indicators of achievement for the project focused on meeting the carefully outlined objectives and intellectual outputs. We developed a combination of quantitative and qualitative ways of measuring the level of success of our project. The key ways of measuring the success of the project externally were that it should impact on our target audience in terms of i) increasing awareness and acceptance of autism; ii) lead to better understanding, knowledge, and skills of professionals and iii) lead to better practice. In addition to this, disseminating the findings and the work of the project and ensuring that it reached people was also a success indicator.

One element of the success of the project is that it should impact on the project members themselves and increase their knowledge, skills and understanding. Project members filled in evaluation forms at the end of each transnational meeting and these captured changes to their skills, knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, we undertook workshops and engaged in writing value creation stories in the last three transnational meetings, and these captured the transformational impact of the project on team members as well as other stakeholders.

Qualitative indicators of achievement were also captured by involving experts reference groups in the development of the materials, by engaging them in giving feedback on drafts of the materials, in order that we could improve them in such a way as to make them as relevant as possible. After each multiplier event, we asked participants to complete evaluations of these and we wrote reports on each Multiplier event, which were based on analysis of the feedback given in these reports. This feedback then informed the planning for the next multiplier event. Evaluations of multiplier events enabled us to monitor how wider audiences were engaging with our work.

Further qualitative indicators captured the impact of the training on the participants by gathering feedback related to their responses to the training, including outlining what they had learnt. We analysed this feedback and wrote reports summarising the findings from it. Indicators of achievement were also measured by capturing the numbers of people who engaged with the project in a meaningful way, and through capturing the depth of impact and change in participants as a result of engagement in the project through the creation of value creation stories.

Quantitative measures of success included numbers of people who read our website and other material; numbers of followers of the Blog and Twitter; numbers of people who participated in multiplier events, and in pilot training and main training at all three levels. Once the project resource website was up and running, we also monitored the number of hits and downloads of resources from this website.
In addition to these mechanisms, there was a range of reporting mechanisms during the

development of intellectual outputs. For example, project members wrote reports at key points in the development of project outcomes. For Intellectual Output one this included sharing various drafts of the questionnaires and interview schedules, drafts of the policy, expert and literature reviews; a written overview of the UK AET programme, and a written case study of a UK hub. For Intellectual Output Two, the adapted and translated project materials were shared with the project coordinator and the core team; short reports were submitted on the evaluation of the materials and summaries of progress were made before each meeting.

4.2. Implementation and monitoring activities

In line with the grant agreement and the original bid, we put in place a range of monitoring activities to assess the extent to which the project was meeting its objectives. The Community of practice approach informed our project management approach and played a highly effective role in enabling effective project implementation. The project was implemented by holding two transnational meetings a year, regular whole-team Skype meetings every two months and regular core team Skype meetings every month, as well as project specific Skype meetings as and when these were needed when working towards a particular Intellectual Output. For example, there was a team of six working together on planning the resource based website. This included one member of staff from University of Birmingham (UoB), a member of staff from Genium Creatives, two teachers from Italy and two teachers from Greece. They met regularly through Skype discussion at key in order to develop the website and they also communicated by email.

Core Skype meetings and whole team Skype meetings served as a way of monitoring as well as guiding. Six team members constituted the core team throughout and consisted of the

principal investigator, the overall project manager, and the two project managers in Italy and Greece. Mentors in the UK were also part of the core team. Two mentors from the UK team supported the Greek and Italian teams. This was not a monitoring mechanism per se, as it was set up to support and enable, but it acted as a mechanism for assessing progress and for diagnosing what level of support was needed in order to complete the project outcomes.

At the beginning of 2016 the project manager re-organised the planning and structure of meetings for that year in order to facilitate the sharing of information on a proportional and appropriate basis, while ensuring that certain team members were not unduly committed to these meetings. In agreement with the team, it was decided that whole team meetings should be once a term, core team meetings once a month, alternating with project manager meetings (which involved one member from each team and the Principal Investigator only). In addition, in order to reflect the high number of additional meetings that were taking place (for example, with the website development team, or between the Principal Investigator and the Project Manager), it was agreed that these would be recorded on an Additional Meetings Form and stored in Dropbox.

It was also agreed that in order to reduce the amount of time involved in recording minutes, these would be simplified to predominantly action points, with individual team members taking their own notes during meetings as needed. For 2017, the same broad pattern remained, although whole team meetings took place mainly at the transnational meetings, with smaller, 'additional' meetings becoming more the norm as the focus of the project shifted.

In the project, minutes and action points were recorded at every meeting as well as summary reports sent to project members beforehand. Dates for these meetings were planned and agreed with partners in advance, which is good practice and helps to ensure good attendance levels. Where necessary, additional ad hoc meetings were scheduled to address specific issues or developments.

To support project management and document sharing we used a Dropbox account. All partners could deposit and view documents (with the exception of confidential information such as contracts). Editing rights were restricted to the core team of project managers, thus ensuring that clear protocols were in place for document management and version control. In the early stages, we also used a Wiki for project management and for development of documents in progress. However, we increasingly found that DropBox and email was more useful to project members, so we stopped using the Wiki. In order to save time during core team meetings, individual teams were encouraged to complete and circulate a 'Team Update' form, which contained a summary of key actions which had taken place since the previous meeting, as well as flag up any points of discussion which might be required during the meeting.

Transnational project meetings took place twice a year and involved the whole project team, with all partner organisations represented. The wider team all took part in these

transnational meetings. Every partner organisation had representatives of the organisation at each transnational meeting. Monitoring also happened through setting key dates at which partners needed to submit timesheets and financial summaries. As well as the communication management approach for the Transform Autism Education (TAE) team as a whole, we also had similar systems set up for each of the Italian and Greek teams to aid communication between them.

4.3.Language issues

An important issue throughout the project was the different languages involved: English, Greek and Italian. While English tended to be the main language used during core or whole team meetings, a number of team members – many of whom were fluent or even bilingual – took on the role of translators for those who were less fluent in one of the languages. At the multiplier events in Greece and Italy, simultaneous translation was available to attendees. Similarly, when school visits were arranged, they were always organised so that each group consisted of team members who could interpret if necessary. Team members also ensured they used simplified language during presentations and meetings.

5. IMPLEMENTATION

5.1. Project activities

The project received a monitoring visit from the National Organisation in July 2015, and they commented: "Project and consortium management is based around the 'Communities of Practice' model, which helps to ensure that everyone has clear roles and responsibilities within the project but also encourages active participation and mutual support. This model was introduced by The University of Birmingham and seems to be working very well".

Communication management was based on putting in place a number of systems for communication, with clarity about how we used these systems of communication. We used email for communicating key issues, both to the whole team and individually to project members. This included communication about meetings, key goals and circulation of meetings, as well as work related to intellectual outputs. We posted all completed documents to DropBox so we had them all in one place. We organised whole team and core meetings in between the transnational meetings and these took place through using Skype conferencing. Finally, we used WhatsApp within the core team for urgent communication and for logistical and organisational communication during transnational meetings.

The main activities organised by the project were Transnational Meetings, multiplier events and workshops. During the transnational meetings the team had a combination of activities. These included workshops, school visits, multiplier events, team building events and social activities. In between transnational meetings, team members had local meetings that were associated with the development of the intellectual outputs, as well as project management and implementation.

School visits

These were a strong element of the project, and happened during transnational meetings, when all project members were given the opportunity to visit schools in the region where the transnational meetings were held. School visits involved observation of practice in the classroom, and also entailed the opportunity to talk to school staff. We organised the school visits in different ways in each country. The Value Creation Stories and evaluations from transnational meetings indicated the value of the school visits to participants. These visits were powerful in enabling cross-cultural understandings between project members, with the opportunity to also take what was learnt from these back to practice in their own countries.

Workshops

We ran a number of workshops. They included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Workshops on how the theory and methodology of communities of practice could inform the development of the project, with a focus on discussing community building activities and levels of participation.
- Workshops on the Value Creation Framework. We ran several workshops on this for the project. This series of workshops started with an introduction to the Value Creation Framework (VCF) in Transnational Meeting Four; followed up by inviting Etienne and Bev Wenger-Trayner, the creators of the VCF, to deliver workshops on how to implement the VCF on our project whilst also engaging participants in writing value creation stories in Transnational Meeting Five. Finally, the team worked collectively to enhance the value creation stories in the final Transnational Meeting, and to participate in reflective activities on the learning that had been generated throughout the project.
- Damian Milton, our autistic consultant, ran several presentations and workshops on how to include autistic people. In the final transnational meeting, he and Rebecca Wood ran a workshop together. These workshops were very well received and had a transformative impact on participants, as outlined in a paper submitted by Rebecca Wood and Damian Milton to the British Journal of Special Education (BJSE).

Modelling and providing professional development

In the first transnational meeting, we delivered Level One training, and extracts of the Level Two training to participants. This modeled the quality and interactivity of the training, and gave Greek and Italian participants a practical insight into how the training was delivered in the UK.

Multiplier events
These are described in detail in a separate section, but in summary, we organised six multiplier events during the course of the project. This included two multiplier events in each country.

Team building events
We organised a number of team building exercises during the course of transnational meetings. In one transnational meeting, for example, project members worked in groups of cross-national teams to produce items of clothing from newspaper.

Project activities related to Intellectual Outputs
There were a number of project activities related to intellectual outputs. In phase one of the project, when we were undertaking research, project activities involved designing questionnaires, travelling to interview participants and running focus groups in different parts of the three countries. During the development of training materials, competencies and quality indicators, project activities involved gathering groups of stakeholders for discussion about the materials. Implementation and delivery of the training were a key project activity for that phase, and in Greece, this also involved following up training with two mentoring visits by a project member to each school to support them in continuing to improve their classroom practice. In addition, project activities involved collating resources and materials for the website and this often involved visiting schools for further discussion with teachers. Project activities also involved organising face-to-face team meetings related to project implementation for local project teams.

Dissemination activities
The project undertook a number of dissemination activities. This included writing newsletters and gathering material for those, speaking at conferences and a range of other events in order to disseminate the work of the project.

5.2. Collaboration between project partners

5.2.1. The project partners

Key partners in the Transform Autism Education project were University of Birmingham through the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER); the Autism Education Trust; Genium Creatives, a design consultancy; Aikaterini Laskaridou Foundation in Athens; Universita del Sacro Cuore in Milan and the Ufficio Scolastico in Monza e Brianza (branch of the Italian Ministry of Education), Northern Italy. The Communication Autism Team (CAT) from Birmingham Local Authority were involved throughout and played a significant role in sharing the expertise and experience in being key partners in the Autism Education Trust partnership in England. Two members from CAT attended all transnational meetings. All project partners contributed to the project and the entire project team worked very well together. One of the strengths of the project was the different competences brought in by different partner organisations, coupled with the clarity in the roles and responsibilities of project partners and individuals within that.

University of Birmingham was overall in charge of managing the project. Their role was focused on developing a clear overview of the project, implementing the different phases effectively and managing communication between partners. We developed a Gantt chart for the different phases of the project and used transnational meetings, whole teams Skype meetings and core Skype meetings to communicate key priorities. The University of Birmingham team, and the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER) were in a unique position to manage this role as they had been commissioned to develop the training materials, quality indicators and competencies for the Autism Education Trust (AET) training programme previous to the implementation of the TAE project. The AET professional development programme had been developed in partnership with a number of organisations in the UK. The experience of ACER meant that we were in an excellent position to lead and mentor other partner organisations to:

- Undertake the background research.
- Support colleagues in other organisations.
- Guide content development.
- Manage and cohere the different partners organisations.
- Implement and manage all aspects of the project.
- Guide the organisation of the transnational meetings and multiplier events.
- Develop and implement the evaluation strategy.

The University of Birmingham team organised two of the transnational meetings.

The **Autism Education Trust** were in the unique position of having commissioned the development of the AET Professional Development programme, and having set up and managed the AET partnership, thus spearheading the largest ever training programme in autism education in the UK. The AET were active and valued partners in the TAE project, and attended all transnational meetings. They facilitated the translation and adaptation of AET materials to Greek and Italian. Their invaluable contribution was primarily focused on advising and supporting partner organisations to develop:

- The collaborative model.
- Processes for creating the materials.
- The sustainable model.

Genium Creative had in depth experience of being centrally involved in the development of the AET partnership and had been responsible for all AET branding, communication, publication and literature since its inception. They were also intrinsic in creating the AETs school based programme in partnership with ACER at University of Birmingham. Their role on TAE was instrumental in designing i) all the publically available intellectual outputs; ii) the resource based website; iii) templates for powerpoint presentations and other documentation. They also trained key project members in uploading materials and maintaining the open access resource website. They supported the development of processes for generating the intellectual outputs and well as the development of the sustainable model. In so doing, they drew on their record in working with clients in the commercial, public and private sectors.

The **Communication Autism Team** at Birmingham Local Authority were centrally involved in the AET partnership since its inception. They are the largest hub in this partnership and they are licensed by the AET to deliver training at all levels, from Early Years through to Post 16. Furthermore, they have a large team of over 50 staff who support over 400 schools in the Birmingham area. They have used the Competency Framework and National Standards to support schools and practitioners to implement their school development plans and training strategies. The CAT team contributed to the Phase One report by writing a case study of the work of a hub. They played an invaluable role in advising and supporting team members in the development of the training materials and the collaborative model in Greece and Italy.

The '**Ufficio Scolastico Regionale Territoriale di Monza e Brianza'** is a branch of the Italian Ministry of Education at province level. The organisation manages 130 schools. As their wider role includes organising and guiding the work of improving the knowledge level of teachers and teaching personnel, their role in the project was invaluable. Head Teacher Renata Cumino was engaged in the project throughout, with several staff from the scholastic office being involved at different points in the project. They were able to work closely with Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) to advise on setting up the expert reference group, share resources that had been generated by teachers, advise on how to develop a sustainable model by drawing on current networks and be involved in generating resources for the Italian materials. They also organised one of the transnational meetings and multiplier events.

Universita Cattolica del Sacro Cuore were instrumental in working with UoB colleagues to write the bid and develop the project management approach, including the Gantt chart. They designed research instruments, and led the development of all the Italian materials and the model of delivery for the three levels of materials, as well as the guidelines for teachers. They trained the trainers and delivered the training in partnership with Ufficio Scolastico to over 200 people. This included building networks with teachers and local authority organisations. It also involved evaluating the training and writing reports on the different intellectual outputs. They completed publications, and disseminated their work to broader audiences. They organised the final transnational meeting and international conference, which attracted over 400 people.

The **Aikaterini Laskaridou Foundation** (ALF) also played a central part in project management. They led the overall design of the first phase of the work and the research. This included the development of research instruments, in particular of the questionnaires, but also the focus group and interview tools. ALF also developed four tiers of training materials by adapting and translating the AET training materials to Greek, as well as the competency framework and quality indicators. They trained the trainers and delivered the training to 1600 people, and they also evaluated the training. They followed up the training with two visits to schools by mentors who were trained by the ALF team. Their work also involved evaluating the training and writing reports on the different intellectual outputs. They completed publications, and disseminated their work to broader audiences. They hosted two transnational meetings and two multiplier events.

5.2.2.Collaboration between partners

There were high levels of cooperation and communication in the project, with a tremendous amount of passion and positive energy. Individuals developed deep friendships and transnational meetings had an energising and positive atmosphere. The project benefited from the fact that all partner organisations had worked with colleagues at University of Birmingham (UoB, the lead institution) before. UoB colleagues had worked closely with Genium, the AET and the CAT team through the AET partnership work, and in the creation of the three tiers of training, as well as the development of the competency framework and the quality indicators (called National Standards in the UK). UoB had also worked with colleagues at UCSC by hosting the UCSC project manager as an intern with ACER, as well as the Principal Investigator speaking at conferences organised by UCSC. The project manager at ALF was a PhD student supervised by the Principal Investigator, and the two organisations had also collaborated through conference presentations before. UCSC and Ufficio scolastico had worked closely together on a separate European project. This background cooperation was important to the project as partners already had a good track record in working together. This got the project off to a good start, and it meant that different organisations and individuals started the project with shared values and a joint passion for effecting change for autistic children.

Communication was greatly supported by colleagues meeting regularly at transnational meetings. As these transnational meetings lasted for five days at a time and took place twice a year, a strong team ethos developed and individuals got to know each other well. A good sense of camaraderie therefore developed and this sustained everyone throughout the implementation of the project.

Implementation relied on a good mixture of cross-national and local implementation. Again, the core team structure helped this process, as the project managers in each country had an overview, whilst not overwhelming everyone by taking charge of communicating and implementing within their own teams.

We set very ambitious goals for this project. To conduct research and also develop and deliver several tiers of training as well as other resources was an ambitious project. We developed training materials, guidelines, quality indicators and competency frameworks, research reports and a multi lingual website, to mention the most substantial intellectual outputs. These high expectations meant that all staff members committed more time to the project than allocated in the bid. We set very high standards in relation to quality, and whilst this clearly was positive, it also meant that team members were often stretched and did not always have enough reflection time.

5.3. Key target groups in the project

Our key **non-academic partners** included schools, Local Authorities, third sector organisations, a design consultancy, regional and national government and business. The participating organisations cascaded the work to other non-academic partners through the development of the training programmes. This involved setting up expert reference groups who were

involved in shaping the materials through giving feedback. These **expert advisory groups** consisted of academics, key policymakers, individuals with autism and practitioners in each country. Furthermore, project partners delivered the professional development programme to a group of educational practitioners in Greece and Italy. Some received training on becoming trainers (train the trainers; n=12) and others received the training as participants (n=1800).

Larger groups that were involved through participating in training included the **schools in which those who have undertaken training were based.** Level One awareness raising included all school staff, support workers, administrative assistants, kitchen staff and so on. Level two training was for teachers who work directly with pupils with autism and Level Three training was directed at those members of staff who wish to take on a leadership role and become 'autism champions.' In total, we worked with six schools in Italy and 110 schools in Greece. We have received feedback from teachers in schools where they have undertaken the training to indicate that they have changed their practice as a result of it, and that the training has therefore in turn benefited the children. Team members have been able to undertake observations to indicate that this is indeed the case through school visits.

A broader group of **policy makers**, trainers and school staff participated in our multiplier events. Finally, last but certainly not least, **autistic people** were centrally involved. **Staff and parents** accessed the open educational resources internationally.

In summary, target groups for the project therefore included autistic individuals (both within the partner organisations and outside), practitioners, policy makers, teachers and trainers in the field and other interested stakeholders. We involved these target groups through focus groups and interviews for Intellectual Output One, through the Multiplier Events, school visits during transnational meetings and by involving expert reference groups in feedback about the training materials.

5.3.1.Involving autistic participants

The TAE project aimed to put the views, experiences and perspectives of autistic people at the heart of the development of the teacher training programmes. In line with the application, each national team appointed an autistic specialist adviser. Damian Milton was the specialist advisor overall for the project, and he supported team members in Greece and Italy by advising them on ways of involving autistic people there.

The specialist advisors were given clear briefs about their role in giving feedback on materials, and their input was invaluable. The specialist advisors were supported to participate in activities and that support was adjusted to the needs of that particular individual. For example, our Greek advisor travelled to the UK for our fourth transnational meeting. It was the first time she had travelled abroad and she needed a support worker to accompany her. We also offered support during meetings, and we were sensitive to the fact that inclusion and participation was different for different people. We worked hard throughout the project to increase the involvement of autistic people in the project in order to develop the principle of

autistic participation. During the week of the fourth transnational, for example, there were a number of presenters and speakers, the majority of whom were autistic.

There were also autistic helpers for the multiplier event during the fourth transnational meeting in Birmingham, who received support from the Communication Autism Team from Birmingham Local Authority. At this event, participation was partly facilitated by the provision of a quiet room for all activities and a flexible approach to involvement in the different aspects of the programme. Some of the autistic participants were provided with additional support by way of a helper and at the venue there was a dedicated toilet with the hand-driers turned off (because of potential sensory issues). The feedback from the transnational week as a whole demonstrated how much the input of the autistic participants was valued by the different members of the team.

6. TRANSNATIONAL PROJECT MEETINGS

We held six transnational meetings in total during the duration of the project: two in each country, involving four different partner organisations in hosting the meetings. All key team members participated in the transnational meetings, with a good cross section of people from the six partner organisations. These meetings were crucial to the project coordination and implementation as they gave participants the opportunity to discuss key intellectual outputs, participate in school visits in order to develop deeper understandings of each others' realities, collectively organise multiplier events and discuss how to disseminate findings. As the TAE project progressed through its different phases, each Transnational Meeting (TM) reflected both the developments that had taken place since the previous TM and the requirements of the subsequent phases of the programme.

Overall, the core purposes of the transnational meetings were, across national teams:

- To share knowledge, discuss progress and set the focus for the next period ahead.
- To ensure progress through the relevant stages of the TAE programme was taking place as planned, to discuss and resolve any problems or difficulties and to consolidate understanding and practicalities about the phases which are to come next.
- To encourage reflection and discussion about the potential significance of the project in the autism research field in order to enhance future publication planning.
- To fulfil any training requirements needed by team members in order to be able to complete the subsequent phases of the project.
- To develop discussions about the theoretical basis of the project (Communities of Practice) and to initiate analysis of its evaluation through the Value Creation Framework.
- To increase the participation of autistic people in the project.
- To disseminate information about the project to external individuals and organisations, and to publicise it generally.

6.1. Transnational Meeting One

The first transnational meeting for the Erasmus+ Transform Autism Education project was aligned with the first phase of the project and took place in Birmingham (UK) from the 2nd until the 6th of February 2015. Karen Guldberg and Lila Kossyvaki were responsible for the organisation of it. Ten different team members were involved in running workshops. The team also visited Topcliffe Primary School, a mainstream primary school with a large resource base for autistic children and Hamilton Special Primary School. Some qualitative comments highlighted that participants particularly valued:

'School visit was very inspiring, gave us an image about how things can become in Greece'.

'Despite big differences in systems there seems to be a shared perspective on autism and SEN'.
'Observing how schools work in the UK provided me with many opportunities to grow as teacher and professional'.
'*The transnational group created a lovely atmosphere which is very important to make a project work'.*
'*The joy of working with a wider group of people who are so passionate about autism'.*

6.2. Transnational Meeting Two

The second transnational meeting in Athens was aligned with the second phase of the project and took place in June 2015, with Katerina Laskaridou and Katerina Sofianopoulou being responsible for the organisation of it. Workshops and discussions focused on planning for the development of the training materials, and the team visited a special school in Piraeus. This was followed by a visit to the Outpatient Centre "Ellogon" in Piraeus (provision for children with autism is divided between education and therapeutic centres).

Some qualitative comments highlighted that participants particularly valued:

"*It was an unforgettable experience* "
"*Wonderful places and wonderful reception*"
"The workshop was very interesting and there was a collaborative climate among British, Greek and Italian participants".
"A wonderful week brilliantly organised. All the arrangements worked like clockwork even though there was a lot of organising to do. Really appreciated the trouble taken with organising visits to schools and visits to Athens. Foundation facilities superb. Maybe multiplier event could have started and finished earlier but that might not have been possible anyway".
"The school visits and the visit to outpatient center made me able to understand Greek inclusion situation, with difficulties and strengths". Grazia from Italy

6.3. Transnational Meeting Three

The third transnational meeting for the Transform Autism Education was aligned with the third and fourth phases of the project and took place in Monza/Milan, Italy from 15th-19th February 2016 and was hosted by the Ufficio Scolastico Regionale (USR) of Monza and Brianza, with Renata Cumino leading the organisation of it. The primary focus of the third transnational meeting was on the website resource and its development. The team visited a mainstream school in Concorezzo and a mainstream school in Lissone.

Some qualitative comments highlighted that participants particularly valued:

"The discussion in the small workshops."
"Informal discussions over meals etc. – building connections & understanding of issues at deeper level."
"Increasing productive international collaborations."
"The visits to Italian schools and the discussion with the teachers."
"Visiting participating schools in Monza area."

6.4. Transnational Meeting Four

The fourth transnational meeting focused on the fifth phase of the project and on autistic participation. It took place in Birmingham, with Karen Guldberg, Alexia Achtypi and Becky Wood responsible for organising it. The team visited seven separate mainstream schools in groups of two, with members of the team being taken to the schools by team members from the Communication Autism Team at Birmingham Local Authority.

Some qualitative comments highlighted that participants particularly valued:

"It is always invaluable to meet up with our transnational partners, face to face, to discuss challenges and progress."
"Everything was very successfully organised. The meeting place was wonderful."
"We had plenty of time to discuss, which was really important."
"The collaboration between partners is really positive and we learn from each other. In this transnational meeting we had the opportunity to exchange ideas."
"A brilliant idea to include so many autistic speakers."
"We are beginning to work as a proper community of practice."
"The real possibility to work with people with autism (for instance, through the autistic panel.)"
"Excellent accommodation, very good organisation."
"Excellent talk about the Wenger evaluation framework."
"Achieving a very good sense of belonging to a community."
"Very interesting, amazing experience!"
"I feel very optimistic. I am sure this project will have a great impact on our schools."

6.5. Transnational Meeting Five

The fifth transnational meeting took place in Piraeus (near Athens). It was hosted by the Aikaterini Laskaridou Foundation, with Katerina Laskaridou and Katerina Sofianopoulou in charge of it. It constituted a shift towards the evaluation phase of the project. As was the case for the previous transnational meetings, the week as a whole involved meetings, presentations and training activities. Setting up the evaluation processes of the TAE was the main theme of the week, as well as initial discussions about the longer-term sustainability of the project.

Some qualitative comments highlighted that participants particularly valued:

"*The warmth and generosity of the Greek team members and the Greek people!"*
"Beautiful!"
"I enjoyed working collaboratively in delivering a workshop."
"Thank you to all the Greek team! It is always a pleasure being welcomed by you!"
"Sharing experiences and documents."
"Dissemination is very very important."
"Everything was fantastic!"
"A lot to fit in but hugely positive."
"Extremely happy with the experience."
"I have loved it. I feel so privileged to experience such a community of practice with such passion and commitment! Thank you."
"It has been an excellent experience!"

6.6. Transnational Meeting Six

The final and sixth transnational meeting took place in Milan and was hosted by the UCSC partner organisation, with Paola Molteni and Roberta Sala in charge of organising it. The week focused on the final evaluation of the project, and on the dissemination and sustainability of the project. It culminated in a conference attended by over 400 people.

Some qualitative comments highlighted that participants particularly valued:

'Sharing understanding with international colleagues'
'Opportunity to meet and discuss with an international group'
'Feeling proud to be part of project'
'Discussion about the planned book'
'It was really interesting to see the steps before the writing of a book.'
'Discussion about sustainability'
'Sharing stories and ideas, collaboration'
'Sharing stories and experiences'
'Sharing my (...) understanding and skill with the others'
'The 3-year process has been an interesting one to negotiate. It took longer than originally imagined to really understand the position in other countries and it is an iterative process where visiting schools to see the development of autism education settings has been key. (...) So often, it is the unplanned learning and reflections which help most and have most long-term

7. MULTIPLIER EVENTS

The project team organised six multiplier events. These events were designed to disseminate information from different phases of the project and to engage wider stakeholders in the work. Thus we held two Multiplier events in Birmingham, two in Milan and two in Athens.

7.1. Multiplier One

A one-day seminar was organised at University of Birmingham, involving partner representatives from Italy and Greece and local participants (students, teachers, professionals, professors, policy makers). This event focused on introducing the Collaborative Partnership Model and also fed into the development and dissemination of the State of the Art report. The seminar 'Autism Education: The State of the Art in the UK' covered findings from Phase One, Intellectual Output One of the Transform Autism Education project.

We invited a range of practitioners, academics and policy makers to cover our Phase One intellectual Output examining the 'State of the Art in the UK' covering current issues, challenges and practice in autism education at both national and local contexts. Dr. Karen Guldberg opened the event by outlining the Transform Autism Education project and the work of Phase One. Christopher Robertson, a policy expert, gave a national perspective on policy, organisation and structure (a core part of the Phase One report). Nik Morgan, from Birmingham City Council Communication Autism Team (CAT), presented the Local Authority perspective by giving an overview on how CAT works. Ian Lowe, the Head Teacher of Topcliffe Primary School, outlined the school perspective. Damian Milton, an adult with autism who is a PhD student at the University of Birmingham and a Head of Autism Knowledge and Expertise at the National Autistic Society, explored the issue of consultation with the autistic community. After the end of the presentations, there was a slot to discuss the implications of Transforming Autism Education led by Dr. Steve Huggett and Ryan Bradley. Forty stakeholders representing a range of organisations took part in the multiplier event; this included representatives from the Department of Education. In addition to the partner representatives, University of Birmingham invited a number of key stakeholders to this event, including representatives from local government, schools and the Department of Education. Attendees at the event had the opportunity to participate in focus groups to inform the development of the State of the Art reports.

7.2. Multiplier Two

The second multiplier event took place in Athens in June 2015 and was entitled 'The inclusion of children with autism in Greece and the challenge of good practice'. In line with the application, this event focused on disseminating the initial findings from the State of the Art reports. This took the form of a one-day seminar at the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, involving partner representatives from Italy, the UK and with local participants (students, teachers, professionals, professors, policy makers). The main goal of the seminar was to outline and share our overall findings from Phase One of the project and to discuss current education

practices and polices in Greece and Italy with the participants. Dr. Karen Guldberg opened the event with a presentation outlining the findings from Phase One of the project, with Damian Milton presenting on involvement of autistic adults in projects generally, and also specifically in relation to this project. Katerina Laskaridis then spoke specifically about the findings from Phase One of the project in relation to Greece and was able to outline in detail the results from the questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. This was complemented by Dr Georgios Karantanos, a member of our external reference group, and also a Child Psychiatrist with a PhD from University of Athens talking about 'The Greek experience in training professionals who deal with autism'.

This panel was then followed by a second panel, which situated the education of children with autism in the broader context of inclusion and integration in Greece. Christina Syriopoulou-Delli, Lecturer of Educational & Social Policy Department at University of Macedonia talked about 'Including people with autism in education and society'; Stefania Fouska, Special Education Teacher, Head of K.E.D.D.Y Piraeus, talked about 'Integrating students on the Autism Spectrum: a challenge for the Greek educational system; Georgios Balamotis, school counselor of 9th District for Special Education talked about Parents and social support: Integration and Nikoletta Mavroeidi MD,MPH,PhD, Medical Epidemiologist, Dpt of Scientific Documentation & Training, Child and Adolescent Centre talked about 'Availability of resources for autism in Greece: The legal framework'.

The third panel focused on giving some positive case studies of good autism practice in Greece, for both children and adults. There were three separate talks. Maria Iliopoulou, Psychologist, President of the Greek Association for Asperger's Syndrome talked about 'A hang out for young people with Asperger's Syndrome: challenges, concerns, perspectives'. Georgia Bambounaki-Rafan, Director of «Myrtillo Κοιν.Σ.Επ. talked about Myrtillo: The integration of children with autism in the workplace and finally Zozefina Tzonaka, Teacher, Special Educator and Vasilis Panopoulos, Director of Ralleios Experimental Elementary Schools talked about 'In search of good practices for children with autism. The role of the Mentor Teacher in Ralleios Experimental Elementary schools'. It is positive that a number of stakeholders and interested parties attended, including representatives from the Greek government and speakers from different sectors with an interest in Autism education. The event was attended by 158 participants.

7.3. Multiplier Three

The third multiplier event was a conference organised by the Ufficio Scolastico Territoriale di Monza and Brianza and involved partner representatives from Greece, Italy and the UK as well as local participants (students, teachers, professionals, professors, policy makers). The main goal of the conference was to present the development of the training materials and the work of Phase Two to participants and partner representatives, coupled with presentations outlining what is currently being offered in the local area. The third multiplier event attracted 90 Italian participants outside the project team. This included 10 head teachers, support teachers, music teachers, mainstream teachers, educators, parents of children with autism, and students of high school. Ten foreign participants attended.

Renata Cumino chaired it, with the Director of the Ufficio Scolastico di Monza and Brianza opening it. Dr Karen Guldberg then spoke about the key findings from the Transform Autism Education project. This was followed by Renata Cumino talking about the local scolastic office and how that works, followed by Professor Luigi D'Alonzo broadening out the discussion to broader issues round inclusion in Italy. After a break, the Director of CTS, Professor Guido Soroldoni spoke about their experiences of including autistic children in Italy. Several teachers then talked about their local networks and how these support their inclusive practice. Finally, the day ended with a lively discussion. The talks were all fundamental to Phase Two of our work in Italy as they set the context for Phase Two of the project. The third multiplier was also the occasion when the TAE project employed social media as part of its dissemination and impact activities. The event was 'live tweeted', and the recently launched TAE blog was also promoted. 131 delegates in total attended the multiplier. They consisted of 97 Italian participants (including ten Head Teachers, support teachers, music teachers, mainstream teachers, educators, parents of autistic children and secondary school pupils), 16 from the UK, 15 from Greece and three from the USA.

7.4. Multiplier Four

A conference was organised at the University of Birmingham, involving partner representatives from Greece and Italy and local participants (students, teachers, professionals, professors, policy makers). The main goal of the workshop was to discuss the strategies in implementing the training of the trainers, the quality assurance and the evaluation for good autism practice. The purpose of the multiplier was also to disseminate information about the project and encourage an interest in its future development. The title of the multiplier was 'From Exclusion to Inclusion: How to Transform Autism Education' and the programme consisted of a series of talks pertinent to the project as well as information specifically about the TAE.

While part of the programme was aimed at providing knowledge about the project itself, other aspects tackled some of the broader principles that underpin the TAE. The keynote speech was provided by Barry Sheerman, MP, a vigorous campaigner in parliament for better access to healthcare and longer-term outcomes for autistic people.

Barney Angliss, who has many years experience working in the field of special educational needs, spoke about issues which can undermine educational inclusion, and explained how teacher training through the TAE and the principles of Communities of Practice can help combat this. Dr Catriona Stewart gave a fascinating presentation on how autism might present in girls and explained the implications of this for their education. Dr. Damian Milton provided important insights about stress and anxiety and how this can impact on the inclusion and participation of autistic children in school. Dr. Karen Guldberg gave a detailed presentation specifically about the TAE and its methodology, in which she also explained how the AET principles operate within the project.

There were also recordings of original music accompanied by video by autistic musician and composer, Anya Ustaszewski, one of which – 'Differences' – explored the issues associated

with being labelled or perceived as 'different'. In addition, there was a slide show from an art exhibition that had been organised by two autistic students as part of a study weekend run by the Autism Centre for Education and Research (ACER) at the University of Birmingham. This consisted of a brilliant display of artwork by autistic children and adults, in which they explored issues around identity, and whether or not the concept of a 'cure' for autism was considered useful. Free tickets for the multiplier were made available via Eventbrite and information about it was disseminated prior to the event. Over 80 people attended the event and the audience consisted of a Member of Parliament, local authority representatives, autistic people and families, academics and teachers.

7.5. Multiplier Five

A one-day conference entitled 'Building Autism-Friendly Schools through the Transform Autism Education Project' was organised at Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation, involving partner representatives from Italy and the UK and local participants (students, teachers, professionals, professors, policy makers). The main goal of the conference was to present the training activity undertaken in each country and how the quality indicators have been used by practitioners. The event consisted of speakers who had involvement with the project at different levels of participation.

The speakers include Karen Guldberg giving a welcome, Katerina Laskaridou giving an overview as well as Kaiti Sereti, Katingo Hadjipateras and Adamantia Psalidakou giving participants their insights into the programme. During the workshops, the participants discussed the training and indicators methodology and efficacy in implementing the project activities. The event attracted over 150 people and consisted of teachers and other school staff, local authority representatives and therapists. Information was shared on social media with the hashtag #TAEAthens using the Twitter account of ACER - @uobautism – and the accounts of our partners. The project was also shared on the newly launched Facebook page - @transformautismeducation, A member of the Greek TAE team created the following short video clip about the multiplier event: https://www.facebook.com/transformautismeducation/videos/390545084647880.

7.6. Multiplier Six

A one-day conference at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore was organised. The event was entitled: 'A new training model for developing a community of practice at school: Results of the Erasmus+ project Transform Autism Education.' As this was the final multiplier of the TAE project, the main goal of the event was to present a synthesis of what has been achieved over the course of the previous three years and to share information about how professionals, researchers and families could access the programme.

The first panel session of the conference covered 'Training and the community of practice'. The following speakers gave presentations: Raffaele Ciambrone from the Italian Ministry on ' The importance of in-service training: the Italian Ministry perspective; Lucio Cottini on "What teachers should know and do to support students with autism at school; Karen Guldberg on 'The Transform Autism Education project: findings, impacts and plans ahead'; Katingo

Hadipateras: Scholastic inclusion and teachers' training in Greece- TAE project outputs. Session two focused on results and project output in Italy. Speakers included Luigi D'Alonzo on 'The Transform Autism Education project: the Italian perspective on inclusion'; Roberta Sala on 'New training models for implementing teachers' good practice"; Paola Molteni on 'Guidelines and indicators for autism: how to improve inclusion at school and Ilaria Folci on "From theory to practice: the importance of school and university working together."

The fourth session focused on 'New personal perspectives' with Simone Stabilini talking about 'The school I have had and the school I would like' and Damian Milton presenting on 'Autistic participation and inclusion.' The fourth session was entitled 'Round Table: the importance of a network. Beatrice Bugnoli talked about 'Building good relationships and practice between schools and doctors'; Alessandra Ballare talked about 'Networking between services and schools; Giada Spasiano talked about 'The role of parents in schools' and Arnaldo Parrino talked about 'The scholastic educator and inclusion'.

The conference also presented the website with open educational resources to press and practitioners. The event attracted 425 people in total, including a member of the department of education. It involved partner representatives from Greece and the UK, local participants and international participants (students, teachers, professionals, professors, policy makers). The Italian team also used the occasion to launch their autism training kit, which consists of the TAE training programme.

8. ENGAGEMENT AND IMPACT

8.1. Autistic participation

The quality and impact of the involvement of autistic participants was particularly helpful to the project. Crucially, the views of people with autism had not been given any special attention in the Greek and Italian educational practice previously. We were successful in involving a small group of autistic people in an in-depth and meaningful way. The inclusion of people with autism in the programme offered a new perspective for the understanding of autism in these contexts. The transformational result of this input is evidenced in the value creation stories generated by team members, expert reference group members and a selection of school staff, as well as narratives generated from a workshop discussion (these are available on the project website).

The involvement of autistic people contributed to transformational change in how autism was conceptualised. At the heart of the development of this programme, was a fundamental shift in the way autism is conceptualised, with the content of the training very deliberately and consistently moving practitioners from a focus on disability to a conception of difference.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the programme was the focus on a shift of attitude in the participants, but also in the members of the team. Our Greek partners highlighted that 'after years and years of considering autism a "tragedy", or a disorder that needs fixing, the programme gave another perspective: a perspective that respects autism and tries to 'understand autism from within'. This change in how autism was conceptualised had a transformational effect on team members, and led to change in their practice, as can be seen by the value creation stories developed by the team.

8.2. Impact on team members

The project has had a beneficial impact on the individual participants in the project, as evidenced by their feedback from the transnational meetings and the evaluation reports from these. It has enhanced their knowledge and understanding of the needs of the stakeholders they are serving. All partners have mutually benefited from the cooperation as it has enabled them to develop their participatory and collaborative working practices, and it has impacted on their technical skills as well. All participants have learnt about policies and practices in other countries and have thus widened their knowledge and understanding.

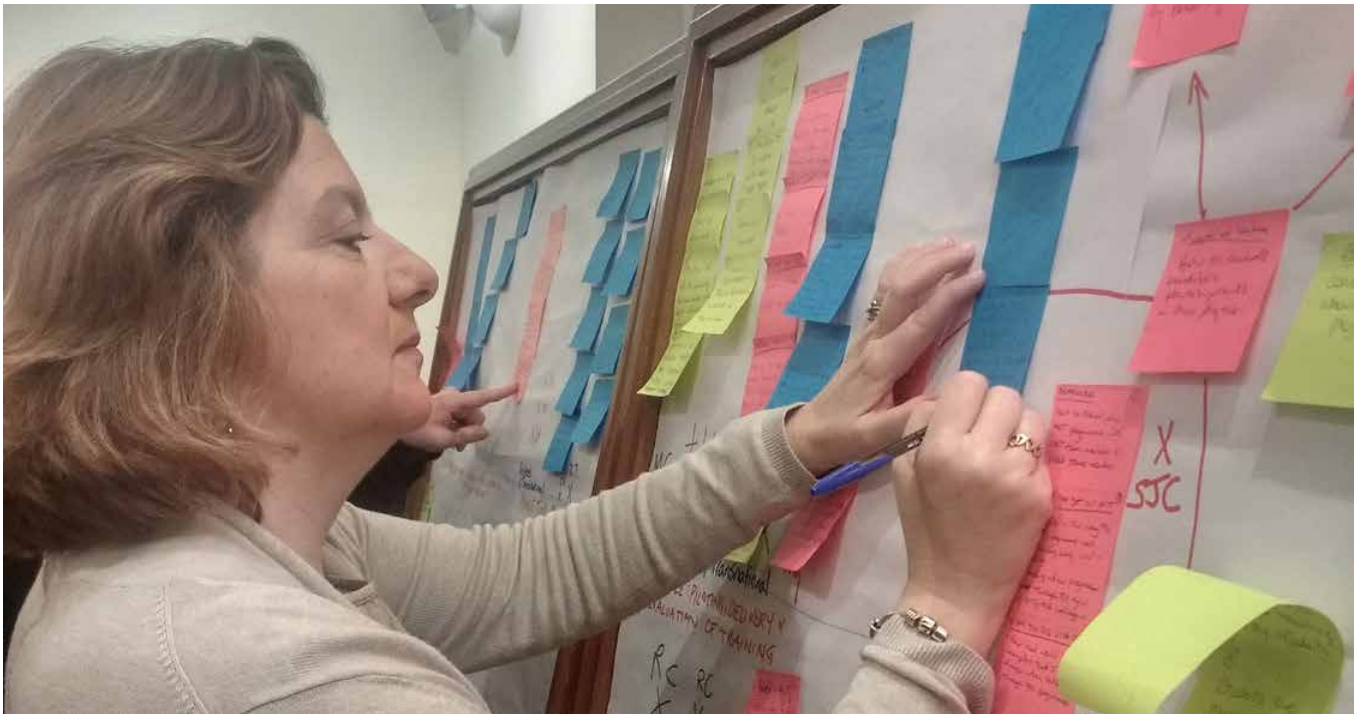
Paola Molteni, project Manager in Italy made the following point: '*The project allowed me to increase my ability to listen to the team needs and manage people's work in a coordinated manner. This project gave me the true insight about how important is promoting a community of practice that must begin inside each team and then it can be promoted to a wider community'.* Rebecca Wood, the overall project manager stated: '*Working on the Transforming Autism Education project has reinforced the idea that in order to improve the education, lives and*

prospects of autistic children, we need to be open and reflective in our approach so that we can develop our practice. Collaborating across nations is a key part of this, and the TAE project highlights the ways in which working creatively with our European partners can ultimately be of great benefit to practitioners and so help autistic children in turn.' Ryan Bradley, core team member, stated '*The project has given me greater insight into policy and practice in Greece and Italy and highlighted the need to provide a more unified understanding of autism and inclusion within Europe."*

For the PhD students involved in the project, their involvement has further developed their abilities to conduct applied research and has contributed towards creating research leaders of the future who can conduct research in partnership with stakeholders. Four members of the project team gained their PhDs in the duration of the project.

8.3. Value Creation Stories

As part of the evaluation of impact of the Transform Autism Education Project, we developed value creation stories. We used the Value Creation Framework to guide this (Wenger-Trayner et al., 2011). Value creation stories are a structured approach to story telling and they give individuals the opportunity to tell a story about what matters to them in their learning. In this project, the stories focused on how the project impacted on an individual or group in terms of their learning and their practice. Over a six month period, we collectively and systematically gathered, analysed and represented people's stories as told by them. Participants were asked to choose a learning activity that had been valuable to them as an individual, be very specific about identifying the immediate value of that activity and what they experienced as part of the learning activity, outline the potential value and what they got from learning, highlight how they applied this and what they did as a result of the learning and finally capture the result of the learning.



This led to a cross section of team members and other stakeholders creating 27 value creation stories. Participants included the core project team as well as participants who had been involved in either the delivery of training or had undertaken the training themselves, with stories emerging from participants in Greece (n=9); Italy (n=10) and the UK (n=8). We found there were four themes that captured the project's impact on participants. These were *transformation in conceptualisations of autism and inclusion; learning through autistic participation*; *learning through doing* and *changing practice*.

The stories highlighted that the conceptual impact associated with the work of the project, was one of viewing autism as a difference rather than a disability and that some of the participants' perceptions shifted from a medical to a transactional model of understanding autism, one that requires mutual adaptation on behalf of the person with autism and those who live or work with that person. This change in conceptualisation led practitioners to change their priorities, and work in a very different ways.

Another strong theme that emerged as important to the participants was the theme of learning through autistic participation. Eight stories focused on the power of learning through autistic participation, four written by autistic participants and four by non-autistic participants. The stories written by the autistic participants had in common a focus on what enabled their participation. This included the importance of interest and motivation; focusing on the underlying conditions that facilitated their involvement; of respect and a non-judgmental attitude from others, and of being listened to, being in a safe place. The non-autistic participants also focused on the conditions for learning. This included reflection on learning at the margins, and on using video clips to capture and understand the perspectives of autistic people.

8.3.1.Examples of Value Creation Stories

We present a sample of six value creation stories here. A greater range of stories are available on our resource website: www.transformautismeducation.org

Paola Molteni, Italian Project Manager

In February 2014, following other phone and mail exchanges, I went to the UK to meet Karen, Lila and Ryan. The ultimate goal of the meeting was to be able to write a project that could include all of our experiences and above all allow us to experiment at European level what was done by AET and the University of Birmingham in recent years. That is, the goal of this meeting was to try to bring together our experiences to continue working together. The atmosphere in the room has since been optimum and favourable to creativity and work together: the friendship and trust that we had shared up to the hour was the basis that allowed us to build a new idea together.

In three days of intense work we have experienced a new way of producing ideas and above all thinking of international design together. We first defined the idea of the work we wanted to do and how it could be carried out internationally. Later, we debated all possible call proposals in Europe and the UK. Initially we were very discouraged because we were convinced that we could participate in a European Research Project (ERC) but we were not eligible. After a few moments of disagreement we managed to find some projects in the European area that could do our case and then another two more British bids. The chance to come up with three design proposals was exciting and exciting: in such a short time we were able to do something really innovative.

The way of working experienced on that occasion made me completely change the perspective on the meaning of designing and projecting a proposal. When I returned to Italy and especially when I started the "TAE" European project, I had the opportunity to share with my team what I had learned, in particular the need to build winning projects, starting from ideas and not just by the calls. In addition, it has clearly emerged the need to identify a coordinator and to activate valid and functional sharing tools.

They have definitely improved the organisational and collaborative skills of the group and this has led to further winning projects and new calls. In addition, attention to European projects has increased and new colleagues have decided to participate in new training sessions on European and national design in accordance with new models of work. All this has allowed for the establishment of a community of practice and not just a team, namely roles and mutual listening, new working methodologies and the organisation of times and places allowed the whole group to implement this multi-level skill. In particular, it has improved the reputation of the institution and individual members, reinforcing their awareness and ability as a researcher, educator, trainer and member of a team.

Elena Zanfroni, Coordinator of CeDisMa

After experiencing several phases of the "TAE" European Erasmus Plus project, during

the Transnational Meeting in Birmingham in October 2016 I had the opportunity to better think about the sense of the experience I was experiencing for more than two years. While participating from the very beginning to the project that besides Italy involved the Greek and British colleagues, in a few moments I was able to reflect in depth on the path we were doing together.

The occasion, however, was offered to me by a meeting where Karen Guldberg illustrated the Value Creation Framework. This pattern of reconstruction of my own story has allowed me to re-read the experience that I have lived up to that moment and drive every step a definite meaning.

The value creation framework allowed me to become aware of the importance of the project I was participating in, taking up the main stages and trying to rebuild a real puzzle, whose tile is represented by visiting the schools, meeting with teachers, exploring new models of teaching, exchanging of daily professional experiences, talking about different legislative references of each partner country of the project.

The model presented allowed me to clearly outline the possible implications that the project itself could have in my professional experience, beyond the very focus of the "TAE" project in my daily work. So I tried to rethink and re-read my teaching activity in the light of the model and this gave me new insights on how to prepare my university class lessons (subjects; special education, adult education), to try to be more effective in my way of teaching.

At the end of my university teaching classes I tried to evaluate the course with the students and some of them told me that they were more involved in the study of discipline and to have understood the meaning of some of the topics discussed and the relocation that these arguments apparently too theoretical, could have supported them on learning their practical profession.

Elena Giouroukou, Greek Team member
In the fist transnational meeting in Birmingham, during the presentation of the material and throughout our meetings, I was impressed by the *different approach towards autism* and autistic people: the approach was very different compared to the Greek medical model of understanding autism. I felt very excited thinking that autism needn't be considered a tragedy (as it commonly is perceived in Greece), that the positive approach that was being suggested in the AET materials, could make a lot more of sense in supporting children and their families.

Furthermore, the suggested model that focused on the opinion of people with autism, supported by the videos of people with autism talking about their school experiences, made me feel very eager to participate in the project, and thinking of ways to use the valuable information we were receiving in our country. I felt I wanted to share my "experience" with everyone working/living with people with autism. It felt it was the "right" way to be with autism.

It changed the way I understood autism, the way I understood intervention and mostly it

changed my expectations of people with autism: not less but different. In working with teachers at schools, I tried to share the values that shook me: respecting the child, respecting autism, listening to the child's opinion, understanding and interpreting children's behaviours in order to find solutions in difficulties in the classroom. In many cases the teachers' response was so amazing and strong that it felt like we were making big changes. We analysed behaviours, we tried interventions and we found solutions to problems, making teachers feel confident in supporting children with autism and children in classes less stressed and happier.

During the training of teachers with the material offered by the AET, the response of the teachers was also very moving: the need to receive advice and to have a context to refer to when they work with children with autism. But also in my private practice, I always use these new understanding with children and their families: being positive, offering solutions that are respectful towards the child. I cannot yet know the effect out training has on teachers, but I listen to their feedback: they want more information, they need more support, they need a context to refer to. It seems our project works in the right direction.

Eleni Angelidi, Greek team member

One of the reasons why I was particularly interested in participating in this project was because for the first time in Greece, people with autism would be included in the process of creating educational materials and their opinions and experiences could be heard. As part of my involvement in the project I was responsible for interviewing and filming people with autism regarding their school experiences and their views on effective education.

The making of these videos was a unique experience for me and one of the most defining moments during the whole project so far. At first, I was very scared because this was not something I had done before and because finding people with autism in our country to speak on camera seemed very difficult, almost impossible. Eventually, two people agreed to do this. On the day of filming, I felt scared and excited simultaneously. I felt proud that the views of these people with autism would be recorded and potentially heard, and I was anxious because I wanted to make sure that their ideas were properly portrayed.

This experience helped me realise that it IS possible to get the views of people with autism in Greece, and that the actual process was easier than I had anticipated. In fact, I discovered that they wanted to say more things and the interviews ended only due to time restraints. The experience made me feel more confident in myself, in the project and in a better future where people with autism are not excluded in the decisions that concern them.

Feeling immensely proud about the video project, I talked about it to many people in my field. I talked about it before it actually happened, as well as after, describing what these people said and why I felt it was important. The experience influenced me very much in my job as lecturer in seminars for professionals who work with people with autism, and since that experience I encourage people to find ways to get their clients to give their opinions, and to use these to inform their practice.

This experience also developed in myself an interest for video-making. So, I filmed and edited several other videos for the project where parents and teachers also spoke about their views and experiences. I also started using more video with the children I work with, to help them pinpoint and process important issues for them. After some time, I was very happy when someone I had spoken to about getting the views of people with autism told me that this changed the way they evaluate their work at the outpatient center that she runs. She said that they now ask children and their families to evaluate their experience at the end of each school year. I was immensely happy for that!

I hope that when the videos I made are uploaded on the website, more people will be inspired and find ways for the voice of children with autism to be heard. Another positive result from this experience is that since the first 2 interviews, more people with autism and/or learning difficulties have come up to me and said that they would like to be interviewed too someday. Finally, since I started using videos in my work with children, I discovered that they love watching themselves on video and this became a new fun tool for us to use in our work together.

Damian Milton, Autistic Advisor on the project

The initial experience of presenting at a conference in Athens 2014 was meaningful to me. Firstly, by feeling valued for my knowledge and input, but also for being able to share my interest in Greek philosophy and its relation to my own concepts/ideas regarding living as an autistic person. This led on to a meeting with others who were also to become involved in the Transform Autism Education project, as they had just received news that the project had received funding.

This meeting helped indicate to me some of the structural and cultural differences in Greece in terms of how services and schools are arranged with regard to autistic pupils, and about how school life and teaching was organised. This encounter led to my own involvement in the project, yet also showed how great autistic participation in the project was possible plus the suggestion of involving lead artistic consultants for the project within the Greek and Italian teams.

It also gave me a sense of value in terms of having insider knowledge for others to draw upon. These links also provided ways in which to combine my previous knowledge with new cultural knowledge, which could make my own contributions more useful and meaningful. I thought about the cultural differences and I felt that those centered around stigma. As a result of stigma, it is not easy to be open and positive about autistic identity.

One of the issues I picked up though visits to schools, for example, was that many pupils were clearly undiagnosed. By applying this new found knowledge with that of others on the project, we not only involved autistic consultants, but also increased autistic participation at transnational meetings. At the fourth transnational meeting in Birmingham, I suggested further autistic involvement in this. This was spearheaded and implemented by the project

manager, leading to her involving twelve autistic people in the next transnational meeting. The process has been realised in terms of greater participation and learning throughout the team on autistic participation more generally. Being part of a wider transformative change within the field, where autistic participation has moved from being relatively unheard of or tokenistic to now being considered the new standard in the field, this project has also shown the potential for wider changes in this area internationally.

It has also highlighted that autistic participation is by no means straight forward. We have all understood the need to reconsider what community means for different people, and we need to think carefully about the role of the autistic person and what participation actually means for them.

Rebecca Wood, Project Manager for TAE

My story takes place in Italy at the airport outside Milan after the Italian transnational meeting of February 2016. Damian Milton (autistic advisor) and I had taken a taxi to the airport and we had quite a bit of time before our flights and so we had time to talk. I had recently joined the project and it was my first transnational meeting. The immediate impact was a simple enjoyment of the conversation and the possibility of talking about the project in a more detailed and also personally-focussed way. I appreciated Damian's honesty and perception.

One of the issues we talked about was his participation in the project and, by extension, autistic participation in the TAE more generally. As part of my PhD, the participation of autistic adults and children is quite important and the conversation with Damian made me think about this more in the context of the project. It also made me consider the extent to which learning can take place in unexpected situations and that we should always be open to the potential of this. What interested me was that this learning was happening in a satellite space - an airport

- which is also a place of transition. I think there are links between this and the marginalised status of autistic people and how we (who are non autistic) can start to think about engaging better with autistic people.

Perhaps we need to think about different environments and places rather than the mainstream institutions. The conversation with Damian was not the only factor, but this, and our subsequent discussions contributed to the fact that I planned much greater participation of autistic people in the Birmingham transnational meeting in October 2016, which I played a major role in organising.

Across the week, I arranged for there to be a number of autistic speakers and presenters and also made sure there was a quiet room available at all times, as well as other forms of support. In fact, the majority of speakers and presenters were autistic, showing that their participation extended well beyond tokenism. Engaging with a number of autistic adults taught me to be patient about communication - to not necessarily expect quick replies to emails, for example, and to not interpret silence as meaning a lack of interest.

The feedback forms from both the multiplier event and the transnational week as a whole demonstrated that the delegates and team members had really valued the participation of so many autistic adults. However, it is important to stress at this is still a process I and the rest of the TAE team need to develop further the participation of autistic people in the project.

8.4. Engagement and impact on target groups and other relevant stakeholders

The project engaged networks of people in a meaningful way that extended beyond expectations. The engagement and impact of the network can be seen from the number of people involved in our expert reference groups (24); the number of people who engaged in training (n= 1600 in Greece; 200 in Italy) and from the number of people who attended multiplier events during the project (n=over 800 in total).

The project has given partner organisations the opportunity to develop the transferrable skills of their staff in developing evidence-based training programmes, a range of interactive and motivating resources for practitioners, delivery of training and the creation of guidelines for staff in schools and other settings. The project has had a particular impact on enabling the development of collaborative practices, of doing things together and the acceleration of the learning process that this brought on.

Value creation stories captured how members of all the partner organisations started working together more collaboratively as a result of the project. Genium Creative stated that their way of working has changed in that they now spend more time analysing and reflecting on progress, alongside consulting other organisations about building analysis and reflection into processes. Value creation stories have also, for example, captured how involvement in collaborating with three others to write the bid, fundamentally changed the way an Italian team member worked with her team in Italy.

Others wrote about how the work had led to improvement in their own and others' professional skills. For the Greek participants in particular, one participant focused on how the work in the project changed her ideas. She talked about the power of collaboration to go beyond what we can do individually. As a result, as a team in Greece, she highlighted that the consequence was that they now meet more often, to discuss and solve problems together and feel more positive about the future.

Eight of the value creation stories documented how practice changed in schools. An outreach teacher who works for Birmingham local authority, UK, in supporting other teachers in mainstream schools, felt that the visits of Greek and Italian colleagues to Birmingham schools strengthened her sense of supporting the practitioners to build capacity rather than be the person always trying to deliver. For a teacher in a Birmingham school, the visits strengthened her appreciation of the importance of providing a network of peer support, cultivating friendship groups and opportunities to develop social interaction skills in a safe, supportive and inclusive environment for the children and young people with autism in their school. One teacher in Greece outlined that she had learnt to behave differently with the children in that she now used visual prompts and provided simple instructions. She felt she could adapt her teaching to individual student needs now, could prevent crisis and manage difficult situations and that the child had reduced meltdowns and collaborated more with others as a result of her improved practice. Another Greek teacher wrote about how her understanding of the importance of peer-to-peer learning had developed, that she had gained tools to implement changes to her pedagogy and had also learnt to deal better with behavior that challenges her in the classroom.

The positive impact on the relevant target groups and stakeholders cannot be underestimated, as the materials improved skills, understanding and knowledge of good autism practice in the school workforce and of the practice and policies of the respective national contexts. The training programme itself is innovative in that it uses film clips, activities built into the training materials, additional resources for practitioners to use, and as such provides an excellent framework for training a number of organisations and individuals to deliver it.

The creation of the Open Educational Resources for wider use internationally has had a beneficial impact on the participating organisations by strengthening their understanding of the universal aspects of good autism practice, helping them identify a range of new resources and thus enabling them to enhance the capacity of their respective organisations. The international website with Open Educational Resources is available to practitioners internationally and provides those stakeholders with vitally needed awareness raising resources about autism education, and about the model of professional development.

8.5. Contribution to the most relevant priorities of Erasmus Plus Key Action 2

The project has contributed to and aligns well with Erasmus Plus Key Action 2 priorities in that it achieved its objective of fostering meaningful and productive strategic partnerships that promoted structured cross-border cooperation. It improved the capacity of all the participant

organisations, as well as of regional authorities and schools that participated in professional development. It enhanced the professional development of those working in education by increasing the quality and range of continuing education in the field of autism education and it facilitated validation of formal and informal learning through the production of tiers of professional development, a set of quality indicators, a competency framework, guidelines for schools staff, and open educational resources.

The collaborative model enabled participant organisations to work together constructively and it enabled researchers and practitioners to co-create knowledge together. The innovative and participatory methodologies engaged a range of stakeholders in its development. This model has in turn led to a sustainable model that continues after the end of the project. The professional development programme, in partnership with the website with open educational resources is making a distinct contribution to improved practices for catering for the needs of a disadvantaged group. It has strengthened links between research and services in the areas in which we have been working.

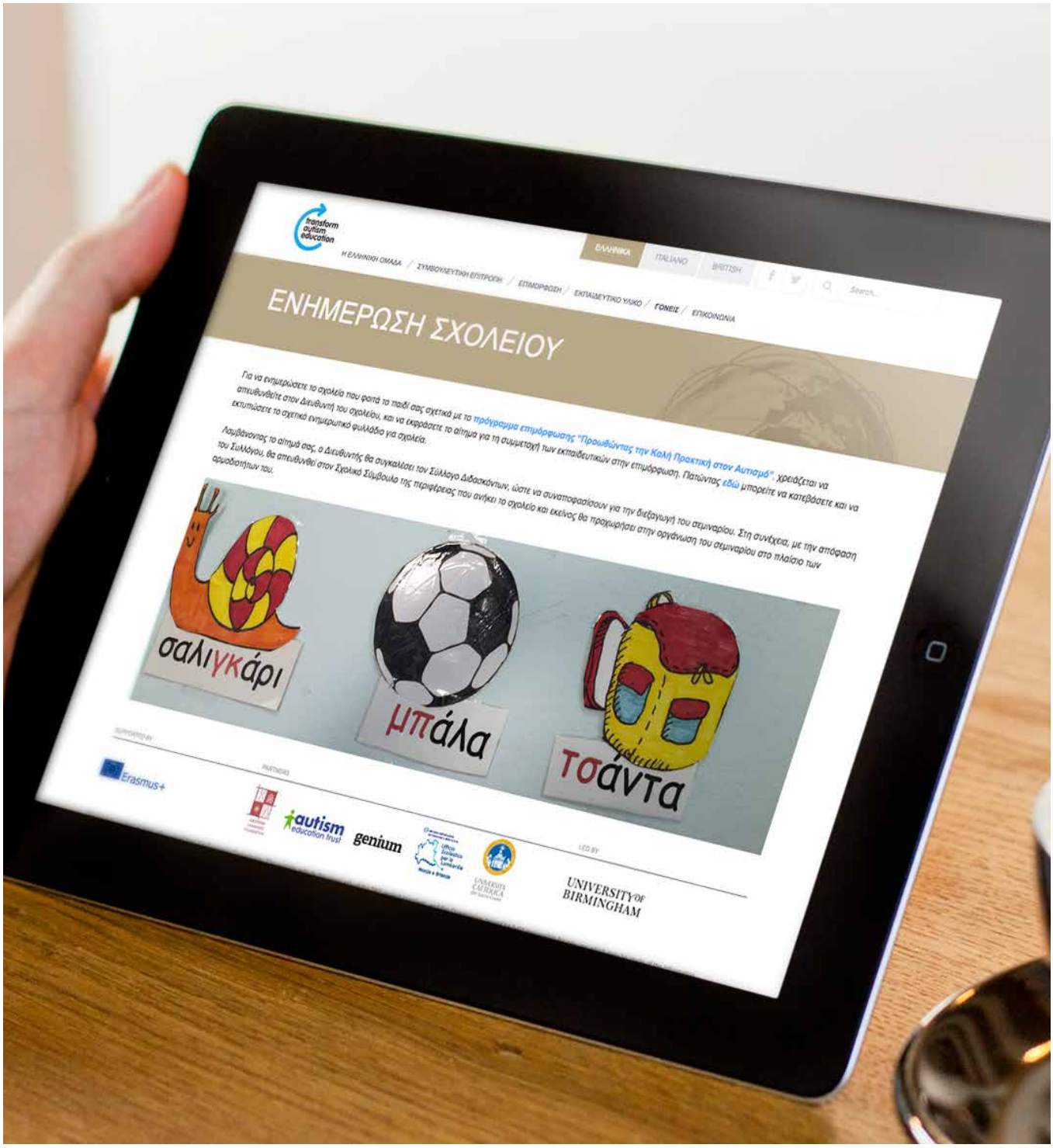
8.6. The impact of the project at the local, regional, European and/or international levels

The desired overall impact of the project was to move the autism education field forward in the UK, Greece and Italy in terms of understanding how to improve the educational knowledge, understanding and practices of teachers who work with children with autism. This move entailed a shift from a focus on deficits to a focus on differences and strengths. We have gathered evidence of impact through evaluating all transnational project meetings; each of the Multiplier events; taking feedback from participants who took part in training and writing evaluation reports on this and creating value creation stories with team members and other stakeholders. We have also monitored how people have engaged with the website, Facebook page, Blog and Twitter (see below under dissemination).

At the local level, we enabled i) increased levels of digital competence; ii) improved competencies linked to professional profiles, iii) new educational practices in the teaching of pupils with autism, and iv) broader understanding of practices, policies and systems in autism education. At a systemic level, the project has led to education and training that is better aligned to the needs of the education workforces in the respective countries. As such, it has contributed to the social inclusion of pupils with autism. The project has also had a broader societal impact by developing knowledge of autism, from awareness raising and day-to-day practices, to training the autism trainers of the future. It has created future autism champions who can cascade the training to new audiences, thus leading to long lasting and sustainable change and impact. There have been organisational benefits for all partners and organisations involved in the project, including widening international networks and learning from good practice in the three countries.

At the European level it is making a contribution to social inclusion in education and social cohesion more widely. We hope that the Open Educational Resources will raise awareness of

autism in a number of countries and will support and reinforce interaction between practice, research and policy. As part of the project, the team has created a model for international collaboration and a method of delivery that can be applied to other countries to research, evaluate and develop educational practice in autism education in different contexts. The model itself and the content therein thus enables the development, transfer and implementation of innovative practices at local, national and European levels. We have already started communicating with potential partners in different countries about extending the model to those countries. This countries includes Qatar, Palestine, China and Hungary.



9. DISSEMINATION

9.1. Target audiences

Our target audiences included our significant network of contacts, including 5000 students (past and present) associated with the Autism Centre for Education and Research (UoB); 3000 students associated to the with the Research Centre on Disability the Università Cattolica of Milan; the vast Autism Education Trust partnership and network, consisting of over 30 organisations and a large database of interested stakeholders; the National Autistic Society; Scottish Autism; Italian autism associations and foundations such as Fantasia, Autismo-Italia and ANGSA-Associazione Nazionale Genitori Soggetti Autistici; the Hellenic Scientific Network for ASD and the Greek autism conferences. In Greece, target audiences included the local parent associations, the Greek Society for the Protection of Children with Autism and through links with the Special Education Department of the University of Thessaly.

Targets of the dissemination plan in Italy include autism associations and foundations, support and mainstream teachers, headmasters, parent associations and, thanks to the Scolastic Office, policy makers and contact persons in the Ministry of Education. Tangible aspects of the dissemination plan are schools' and centres' websites which have a link to the project, the delivered materials, the case studies, the knowledge and the experiences of the participants. An important target audience, whom were also key participants in the project, were autistic people themselves. We provide two examples here of the team engaging with autistic people themselves and organisations that represent them. The Italian team collaborated with "Spazio Asperger", a national organisation that promotes the awareness on autism. This association proposed an adult with autism with specific training on education and communication. Since January 2016 this person had an active part in supporting the Italian team and reviewing the materials developed. They organised a set of events together for World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) and they promoted a free book written by him on including pupils with autism in primary mainstream school.

In Greece the Greek team welcomed Kaiti Bakopoulou who is an adult with autism herself as part of their team as their consultant. She provided very useful feedback on the materials and participated in a joint session with Damian Milton, consultant to the UK team in finding ways to increase her participation and input in the project. In addition, Damian Milton gave a presentation in Athens as part of World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD) and the Greek team held an event on Creating Autism Friendly Societies. The event was held at Myrtillo café an autistic led social enterprise. A number of adults and teens with autism came to the event and their feedback after listening to Damian was that they felt very inspired and empowered and that it helped them see themselves in a different light.

The primary goal of the project was to raise the knowledge, skills and understanding of the education workforce in meeting the needs of individuals with autism. Outside of our existing

Welcoming Children on the Autism Spectrum in Mainstream Primary Schools: Teachers' Attitudes and Perspectives on Inclusive Education.

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Background and Objectives

An effective educational and inclusive programme for a child with autism requires the expertise of a team of teachers and school staff working together in a careful, coordinated manner, in partnership with parents and family members. Competence and positive attitude is fundamental to understanding and designing a learning plan for children on the autism spectrum.

The **aim of this study** was to investigate the perspectives of regular teachers and support teachers in relation to the inclusion of children on the autism spectrum in mainstream primary schools in Italy (province of Monza and Brianza).

The **research questions** are:

1. What do professionals think about scholastic inclusion of students with autism?

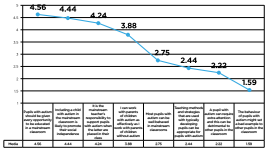
2. How do they feel about their work with a student with autism? How would they describe their work with students with autism?

This study was part of the **Erasmus Plus Project: "Transforming Educational Practice in Autism: Enhancing the skills, knowledge and understanding of teachers in the UK, Italy and Greece"**. The Italian partners of this project are the *Research Centre on Disability and Marginality – CeDisMa, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and the Scholastic Office of Monza and Brianza, Ministero dell'Istruzione*

Results

The main part of the survey aimed at investigating the opinions of the participants on three areas. In the questionnaire, each participant indicated his/her own agreement or disagreement with the statements using a Likert scale with values between 1 and 5 (1= complete disagreement; 5= complete agreement). Quantitative data collected through the questionnaire were completed and enriched by qualitative reflections shared with the research team through the expert surveys and the focus groups.

Area 1: What do you think about scholastic inclusion of students with autism?



The sample **strongly agreed** with the statements: *"Including a child with autism in the mainstream classroom is likely to promote their social independence"* (mean: 4.44), *"Pupils with autism must be given every opportunity to be educated in a mainstream classroom"* (mean: 4.56)

Area 2: How do you feel in your work with a student with autism?

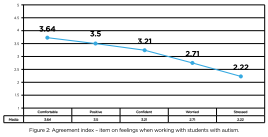


Figure 2. Agreement index – item on feelings when working with students with autism.

Area 3: How would you describe your work with students with autism?

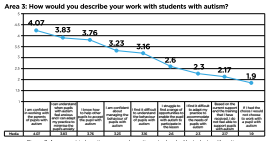


Figure 3. Agreement index – item on good practices at school with students with autism.

There is **clear disagreement** on the statements *"Based on the current support and the training that I have received, I do not feel able to support pupils with autism"* (mean 2.17) and *"If I had the choice I would not choose to work with a pupil with autism"* (mean 1.90).

The reflection on the meaning of inclusion was also enriched by the contribution of focus groups and expert surveys. What emerges is an **idea of inclusion that starts considering the uniqueness of each single student and offering him/her the best growth and learning opportunities**, fully succeeding in expressing and sharing with others at the best of his/her capabilities. To reach this goal of inclusion, **it is necessary for teachers to be well trained and qualified, understanding not only the meaning of autism**, but also the meaning of diversity and disability, to educate the group of students to welcome and respect others.

The main topics of discussion were focused on:

- Meeting the needs of pupils with autism is unavoidably based on a positive **perspective towards inclusion** in mainstream schools.
- A positive attitude needs to be coupled with **practical support** through training and mentoring inside schools.
- It is necessary **overcoming structural and practical difficulties** in adapting teaching approaches and materials to avoid educational mistakes.
- Schools would benefit from belonging to a wider **community of practice** through which teachers can work together to overcome those tensions.

Conclusion

The research findings highlight that the responsibility for including a child with autism is shared between all the teachers and professionals active at school.

The results underline that a positive attitude towards inclusion is favourable in engaging with the child, the class and the parents, strengthening a community of practice that together promotes a more inclusive school. Implementing scholastic inclusion for students with autism is not simple neither easy but it can be possible if the team works in a coordinated manner and shares the same views.

Most of participants feel satisfied and happy to teach students on the spectrum but declare it can be complicated to adapt the classroom materials for them. The research confirms a positive attitude towards inclusion of pupils with autism.

Methodology

Research Tools

Researchers and practitioners worked together as a community of practice, using mixed methods to gather data through focus groups (n=3), semi-structured interviews (n=9) and questionnaires (n=185). The research tools developed were based on the original materials developed by a project partner, the Autism Education Trust (2015), and Molteni (2014).

Participants

The questionnaire was developed electronically, using the online software SurveyMonkey®, and it was disseminated to schools out of the province of Monza and Brianza through the CeDisMa website and newsletter, and an official protocol promoted by the Provincial Scholastic Office. 185 professionals responded to the questionnaire with this sample composed mainly of women (90%) and teachers (88% – curricular teachers 45%, supporting teachers 43%).

The participants of the focus groups (n=30 – 10 per group) and expert semi-structured interviews (n=9) were selected directly by the research team from provincial and national stakeholders, among whom there were important headmasters and ministry employees. The qualitative and quantitative data collected during the research were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Supported by: Erasmus+
Partners: University of Birmingham; autism education trust; genium; Ufficio Scolastico per la Lombardia – Ambito territoriale di Monza e della Brianza; Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

References: Cottini L., Vicenti G., Autismo: come e cosa fare con bambini e ragazzi a scuola, Giunti scuola/Terrea, 2013 D'Alonzo L., Come fare per gestire la classe nella pratica educativa, Giunti Scuola, Firenze,2012 Mollteni P, Guldberg K, Promoting educational framework for autism in English school, mainstream, Italian Journal of Special Education for Inclusion, 2013, vol 1, n.1, pp. 130-139

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Training and emotional needs of professionals working in mainstream, special schools and multidisciplinary outpatient centers for children with autism

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Background and Objectives

In our study, teachers and professionals who work in different settings in Greece participated. More specifically, teachers working in mainstream schools and other professionals (such as psychologists, special educators, speech therapists and occupational therapists) working in special schools, autism specialist schools and multidisciplinary outpatient centers. Initially, we recorded the percentage of those who have had previous training in autism as well as the type of training they have received. Then we recorded the level of confidence and the level of stress they experience in their everyday life when working with children with autism.

Methodology

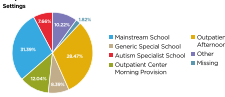
Material

Information about the training and the emotional needs of professionals working with children with autism was collected using an adapted version of a questionnaire originally developed by Avramidis, Bayliss and Burden (2000). The questionnaire included 41 items, rated on a likert scale (range 1-5). For participants who work in settings out of the greater Athens region, a pdf format of the questionnaire was administered via e-mail. The questionnaire was also put up on the Aikaterini Laskaridis Foundation's webpage, Facebook page and Linked page.

Participants

The questionnaire was completed by 274 teachers and professionals (psychologists, special educators, speech therapists and occupational therapists) working in 8 special schools, 3 generic nursery and primary schools and 16 outpatient centers in the Athens Region. Out of the total number of participants, 31.39% were working in mainstream schools, 8.39% were working in generic special schools, 7.66% were working in autism specialist schools, 41% were working in outpatient centers, and a final 10% were working in other types of setting.

Graph 1:
Settings



Results

Training

The need for continuing education and training for professionals, that is consistent with the needs of children with autism, was emphasised by the vast majority of professionals not only in the questionnaires, but also in the focus groups and the interviews.(Table 1)

Table 1: Prior Autism Training
Settings

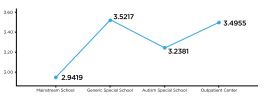
The details of the interventions that the participants have been trained in, indicate that more than half (59%) of the participants had been trained in TEACCH, half (50%) of them in PECS, a further 36.2% in ABA, and 38.2% in social stories. (Table 2)

Table 2: Types of intervention
Percentages

Emotional Needs

Professionals working in multidisciplinary outpatient centers such as psychologists, speech therapists, occupational therapists and special educators reported higher levels of confidence in their ability to manage children's behavior. (Table 3)

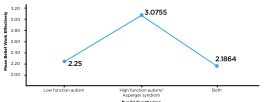
Table 3: Mean confidence in behavior management according to work setting



Regarding perceived stress when working with children with autism, professionals who had received prior training (m=2.20, SD= 1.03) reported significantly ($t(269)=5.82, p<0.000$) less stress when compared to those who had none (m=3.13,SD=1.02) and even more so if they were trained in autism specific interventions(m=2.11, SD= 1.02).

Finally, our findings indicated that participants' feeling of working more effectively is greater when dealing with children with high-functioning autism, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4: Difference in professionals' beliefs that they can work effectively according to their pupils level of functioning



Conclusions – Perspectives

According to our findings, more than 90% of professionals working in special and autism specialist schools and multidisciplinary outpatient centers have received specific autism training. In contrast, no more than 50% of teachers working in mainstream schools have received any training in autism. Regarding the different interventions, TEACCH, PECS and ABA seem to be the most common. As far as the emotional needs are concerned, it is not surprising that professionals reported increased self-efficacy levels but also reduced stress levels compared to teachers.

Discussion

As part of the Erasmus Plus Project, this study was a first systematic attempt to identify training and emotional needs of professionals who work in different settings, with children with autism in Greece. Among the findings, a large gap seems to appear in teachers' autism training, which has a great impact on their sense of self-efficacy and stress levels. Improving knowledge and enhancing their skills is an urgent need that will not only help to improve their quality of life but mainly contribute to the integration of children with autism in mainstream schools. Limitations of this study include the relatively small sample and the fact that the questionnaire was a self reported instrument. Our findings provide important information and underline the need to design more effective and integrated programs for both teachers and professionals.

Supported by: Erasmus+
Partners: University of Birmingham; autism education trust; genium; Ufficio Scolastico per la Lombardia – Ambito territoriale di Monza e della Brianza; Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

Literature Cited: Avramidis E, Bayliss P & Burden R. (2000). A Survey into Mainstream Teachers' Attitudes towards the Inclusion of Children with Special Educational Needs in the Ordinary School in One Local Education Authority. *Educational Psychology, International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*

Acknowledgement: Funding for this study was provided by Erasmus Plus Project. Special thanks to all pupils participants for their contribution to the study.

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Supporting Children on the Autism Spectrum in Mainstream Primary Schools: Teachers' Training Needs

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Background and Objectives

Training needs analysis is a key topic area involving different variables (personal, institutional, social, cultural), relating to each other in a complex meaning system.

The **aim of this study** was to investigate the training needs of regular teachers and support teachers in relation to the inclusion of children on the autism spectrum in mainstream primary schools in Italy (province of Monza and Brianza).

The **research goals** are:

1. Analyze the starting state of knowledge of participants, relating to the type of courses attended in the last five years

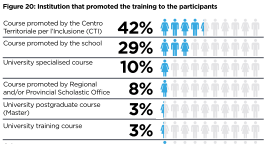
2. Investigate the kind of training need they perceived, in terms of specific methodology they thought to be most relevant for this particular thematic field

This study was part of the **Erasmus Plus Project: "Transforming Educational Practice in Autism: Enhancing the skills, knowledge and understanding of teachers in the UK, Italy and Greece"**. The Italian partners of this project are the *Research Centre on Disability and Marginality – CeDisMa, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore and the Scholastic Office of Monza and Brianza, Ministero dell'Istruzione.*

Results

Almost half of the sample (42%) attended courses promoted by the *Centro Territoriale per l'Inclusione* (CTI). Only 16% took part in a university educational course (specialised course – 10%; Master course – 3%; training course – 3%) (Fig.20).

Figure 20: Institution that promoted the training to the participants



The training courses the sample attended have variable duration and planning. It is possible to point out that the training courses the sample attended the most, promoted by the school they work in or by territorial Institutions, had a total mean duration of 13-15 hours. Furthermore, 23% of the sample took part in specific training courses about useful approaches to work with students with autism, such as TEACCH, Augmentative and Alternative Communication and ABA. In the questionnaire, participants were asked to think about which type of training they would need to improve their knowledge on working at school with students with autism: only 5% declared a need for basic and general training, while 39% would like workshops and practical training, specific for their own classes. 39% of the sample would like an exhaustive and specialised training that would also allow them to help their colleagues at school and promote inclusion in their institution.

Figure 22: Required training

Workshops and basic training are mainly required by curricular teachers, while supporting teachers and educators express their desire to participate in more exhaustive and specialised courses

Through the qualitative survey tools (focus groups and expert surveys), it was possible to collect further information on the need for training and the possible ways to improve educational courses for teachers.

Methodology

Research Tools

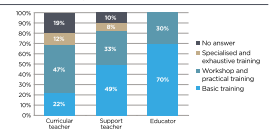
Researchers and practitioners worked together as a community of practice, using mixed methods to gather data through focus groups (n=3), semi-structured interviews (n=9) and questionnaires (n=185). The research tools developed were based on the original materials developed by a project partner, the Autism Education Trust (2015), and Molteni (2014).

Participants

The questionnaire was addressed to curricular and support teachers and scholastic educators that work with children with autism in primary schools located in the province of Monza and Brianza.

The questionnaire was developed electronically, using the online software SurveyMonkey®, and it was disseminated to schools out of the province of Monza and Brianza through the CeDisMa website and newsletter, and an official protocol promoted by the Provincial Scholastic Office. 185 professionals responded to the questionnaire with this sample composed mainly of women (90%) and teachers (88% – curricular teachers 45%, supporting teachers 43%).

The participants of the focus groups (n=30 – 10 per group) and expert semi-structured interviews (n=9) were selected directly by the research team from provincial and national stakeholders, among whom there were important headmasters and ministry employees. The qualitative and quantitative data collected during the research were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).



The main topics of discussion were focused on:

- The **importance of motivation**. For participants, it is fundamental that every training course is presented to them in an efficient, curious and interesting way, to motivate them to attend the course although it is not obligatory.
- The opportunity to promote **modular workshop** courses, allowing participants to learn more about the subject and the educational and didactic strategies they can use, and to be monitored and mentored by trainers
- The need for **intensive training courses**, to a specific team or institute, based on the specific students they will welcome. Preferably before the beginning of the school year and particularly in the case of teachers that have never had any sort of information on autism.
- The need to learn more on the **topics of communication, social relationship, estimates and autonomy**.
- The importance of **extending the training to headmasters and auxiliary personnel**.
- The relevance of **monitoring the efficiency** of training activities and their influence to school practices. Some of the participants suggest the need to evaluate competences before and after the course and to record the activities done in class, to share them with the entire school.
- The importance of **course output and materials dissemination**, in order to **implement good practice** in the school network.

Conclusion

Teacher training is the fundamental basis to promote a positive path towards inclusion of pupils with autism in school. Consequently, it is very important to deliver a proper training, able to answer the teachers' and scholastic professionals' needs.

This path can happen only if a training programme is relevant for the context: it must deliver specific contents for the teachers' daily practice, promoting knowledge, competence and policy changes.

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Inclusion in Practice: European Perspectives on educating and empowering pupils with Autism

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Background and Objectives

There has been a global move towards inclusive practice over the past 20 years following key principles first encompassed in the Salamanca Statement (1994). These principles have been reinforced by legislation, policy and recommendations at national, European and global levels, including the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006). Yet despite a widespread acceptance of and commitment to inclusion, it is clear from much of the literature that definitions vary. The ideology of inclusive education is implemented in different ways across different contexts and varies with national policies and priorities. Inclusive pedagogy and practices for pupils with autism in the UK, Greece and Italy.

The **aim of this study** was to

1. Examine the unique challenges faced by different countries in meeting the needs of pupils with autism

2. Learn from this to develop international perspectives on good autism practice in education

The **research questions** are:

? **How is inclusion conceptualised and realised for pupils with autism in the UK, Italy and Greece?**

? **What key issues do practitioners and policy makers face in the education of pupils with autism?**

? **Are teachers adequately prepared for inclusive education?**

This study was part of the **Erasmus Plus Project: "Transforming Educational Practice in Autism: Enhancing the skills, knowledge and understanding of teachers in the UK, Italy and Greece"**. The UK partners of this project are the *Autism Centre for Education and Research at the University of Birmingham.*

Methodology

Research Tools

A community of researchers and practitioners in three separate countries collaborated to build a nuanced picture of the evidence base in each context by examining the interrelationship between policies and practice on inclusion, teacher education and the needs of teachers. Acknowledging the importance of both research and practice in the methodology, the study involved project partners working together as a community of practice (Wenger, 1998) by undertaking a scoping study of the policy literature, including interviews and focus groups with key policy makers and practitioners, and questionnaires to teachers and other school staff in the UK, Italy and Greece. The qualitative and quantitative data collected during the research were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Participants

The questionnaire was sent to staff working directly with primary aged pupils with autism in Italy, Greece and the UK. This included teachers, support staff and health professionals. The questionnaire was distributed electronically, using online software, through existing partner networks. This resulted in a total response of UK (n=236), Italy (n=185) and Greece (n= 274). The participants of the focus groups (n=9) and expert semi-structured interviews (n=24) were invited to take part in the study by the project partners from local and national contacts. The focus groups consisted of school practitioners and the interviews were with key policy makers in the field of autism and SEND.

Results

Inclusion

There is varying commitment in all three countries to tailoring pedagogy and teaching to the specific needs of pupils with autism, with a range of different types of provisions and learning environments. This is coupled with key structural differences in the deployment of school staff, unique pedagogical outlooks and a variety of perspectives on the relationship between therapy and education.

UK legislation and policy focuses on the need for a wide variety of provision for pupils with autism, with a specialised individual definition coming to the fore.

Italy approaches inclusion as a locational issue.

Greece has strongly segregated provision, with a divide between schools and therapeutic centres.

Teacher Education

Whilst teacher education in the UK places little emphasis on training teachers to meet a diverse range of learners, Italy requires teachers to specialise in teaching pupils with special educational needs. Greece has educational laws and reforms obliging teachers to improve knowledge and skills to meet the needs of pupils with special educational needs. Teachers in all three countries are clear about the need for in-depth training. UK participants stress the need to develop more coherent training programmes across all four nations whilst findings in Italy and Greece identify the need to overcome the structural and attitudinal barriers between mainstream teachers and specialist teachers. All participants stressed that the existence of a multitude of training agents from the private and the public sector, many of which are of dubious quality, leads to the provision of disorganised, ineffective and poor quality training.

Conclusion

Systems for inclusive education are embedded in both the general and special education frameworks of provision that exist in individual countries. The education and inclusion of children and young people with autism varying across Italy, Greece and the UK in line with national policies and priorities.

In contrast to the move towards the Europeanisation of autism in Public Health (see EU-AIMS) autism education within Europe appears more fragmented with national policies influenced by a whole range of social, cultural, historical and political issues. Though European legislation and policy has moved towards greater inclusion fundamental differences were found to exist in both the perception and reality of inclusion for individuals with autism in all three countries. As such, there are gaps between the rhetoric of inclusion and practices surrounding it, with a number of paradoxes emerging.

Our research emphasises that to reach the goal of inclusion, it is necessary for teachers to be well trained and qualified, understanding not only the meaning of autism, but also the meaning of diversity and disability.

According to an Italian interviewee:

'Inclusion can be considered as the result of pedagogical choices, but above all of a collective didactic action that can create a group in which diversities are welcomed and fully appreciated and contribute to support the growth and learning process of everyone: diversity and disability should be part of the culture as something "normally" faced; we are all normally different and each one of us needs a process that is adequate to him/her.'

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networks, our main target audience for this at local and regional levels was staff in school settings in Greece, Italy and the UK as well as training organisations, voluntary and non profit organisations as these are the people we wished to provide awareness-raising and training to. These were the target audiences whose knowledge and practice we wanted to enhance through the development of the intellectual outputs and strategies of the project.

In addition, the development of the training required people who were keen to engage with delivering the training in a variety of schools and other settings. At regional level, it was therefore crucial to target audiences through school networks and education departments within local and regional authorities. Hence we engaged with staff at the Ufficio Scolastico in Monza and Brianza and with the Communication Autism Team at Birmingham Local Authority in the UK, for example, as well as a network of schools in associated with our partners ALF in the Athens and Piraeus region, and particularly through links with the Ralleia experimental schools .

We were also interested in reaching academics and students as the project represented a good example of knowledge co-creation between researchers and practitioners. We wanted the project to represent a strong example of community engaged scholarship, with the opportunity to train a new generation of researchers who are committed to participatory research with autistic people centrally engaged in this research. The project provided a model for enabling students and early career researchers to participate in a project in which they were given the opportunity to be involved in knowledge co-creation, engagement with practitioners, parents and people with autism throughout. We wished to disseminate this approach to other academics and students as we believe this approach is more likely to lead to change and impact on practice in the field of autism educational studies.

At national level, our target audiences were policy makers and Ministries of Education in the respective countries so that the project could become a model of good practice in the development of continuous professional development courses. Members of the Department of Education in the UK participated in our multiplier event in the UK; at the final conference in Milan, a representative of the ministry of Education opened the conference and in Greece, we engaged with a number of members of the Ministry of Education throughout the project. This was particularly important in Greece, as training could not take place without official approval from the Ministry of Education.

At European level, we were keen to engage with wider audiences of academics and practitioners in order to illustrate the power of the collaborative model based on the development of a community of practice. These audiences primarily consisted to academics in Universities, with the resource website aiming to reach wider audiences in schools. We reached an audience of international participants through our delivery of posters and a workshop at the Autism Europe conference.

9.2. Dissemination activities

Our dissemination activities included dissemination of project activities through:

- Multiplier events
- Websites
- Newsletters
- Publications
- Social Media
- A Project Blog

9.2.1. The multiplier events

The multiplier events have been the lynchpin of the dissemination of information about the TAE project, as well as an important means by which its impact can be measured. The multiplier events have been reported in the section on multiplier events. In order to provide a flavour of feedback from multiplier events, a few representative examples are presented below:

- *The variety of talks and all the ground covered* (Birmingham, October 2016)
- *The passion of the speakers* (Birmingham, October 2016)
- *Contribution of people with autism* (Birmingham, October 2016)
- *Low level banging outside* (Birmingham, October 2016)
- *The whole programme is wonderful* (Piraeus, February 2017)
- *Everything was great* (Piraeus, February 2017)
- *More evidence (needed) of benefit for autistic children* (Piraeus, February 2017)
- *Too much theory* (Milan, June 2017)
- *Hearing different viewpoints and experiences* (Milan, June 2017)
- *No improvements needed* (Milan, June 2017)

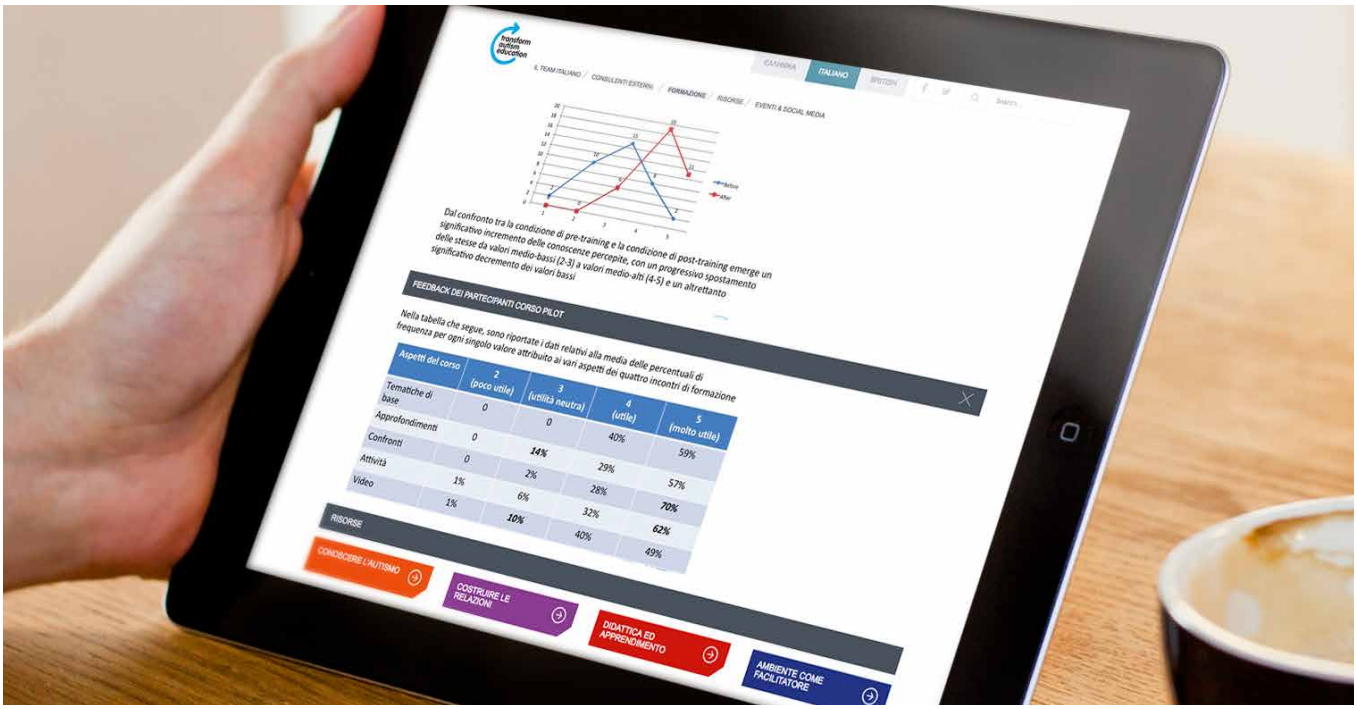
9.2.2. Websites

The University of Birmingham TAE website was created to disseminate project results specifically to an *academic* audience. This provided information about the project, with the view of giving those who accessed it a flavour of the processes involved in setting up the teacher training programmes in Greece and Italy. The URL for this website is:

http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/generic/transform-autism-education/index.aspx

By October 2017, this website had attracted 4,917 unique page views by people from a number of countries. The majority of those accessing the website were from the UK, Greece and Italy, but viewers from Spain, the Philippines and Romania each constituted 7% of viewers.

In April 2017, and corresponding with World Autism Awareness Day (WAAD), a resource-based project website was launched. This was one of the intellectual outputs of the project: www.transformautismeducation.org



In October 2017, this website had attracted 26,217 page views and 3,987 users, with a total of 5,631 sessions.

In addition, the Laskaridis Foundation in Piraeus and the Università Cattolica del Sacre Cuore in Milan also provide information about the TAE project on their websites.

At European level, we have disseminated our work through the **Erasmus Plus+ dissemination platform** by uploading all our intellectual outputs.

9.2.3. Social Media

The **TAE Blog** was launched in January 2016. The main purpose of the blog was to provide information about the project in an accessible way for broad audience. The posts consisted of updates about the different phases of the project, explanations of key activities such as transnational meetings and multiplier events, interviews with some team members and discussion of some of the core ideas associated with the project.

The Blog: https://transformautismeducation.wordpress.com

Between January 2016 and August 2017, the blog attracted approximately **3.5K views** from **2K** visitors from around **40** different countries. The majority of visitors to the blog were from Greece, Italy and the UK, followed by the USA, Ireland and Australia.

The TAE Facebook page was set up in March 2017. **Facebook:** between February 2017 and August 2017, approximately **7K** people were reached (from @transformautismeducation account).

We used **twitter** to promote the work of the project, at multiplier events in particular. For example, for Multiplier event four, the event was shared on social media with the hashtag #TAEBirmingham. The transnational event overall created 18,000 tweet impressions from the @UoBautism account. Some of the responses to the multiplier were made into a storify, where the positive reactions to the speakers, the different aspects of the programme and the TAE project are evident: https://storify.com/UoBAutism/transform-autism-education-transnational-week-birm

Between February 2016 and August 2017, there have been approximately **68K** tweet impressions (from @UoBautism and @theTAEproject accounts).

9.2.4. Conferences

The TAE project has been promoted at two **international conferences** so far. **Autism Europe 2016** constitutes one of the most important autism conferences on the international calendar. In 2016, Edinburgh was the host city, and the TAE team was granted four poster displays as well as a workshop. During the workshop, representatives from the three national teams described the project and its aims. In addition, a member of the Autism Education Trust (AET) explained how their programme provided the founding model for the TAE training materials.

The Globalisation of Autism: Historical, Sociological and Anthropological Reflections (2017). This was an international conference held at Queen Mary, University of London, which included presentations from across the globe, reflecting a range of international autism projects taking place within a number of disciplines. Members of TAE gave a presentation entitled 'Beyond Tokenism: Autistic Participation in a Transnational Community of Practice'.

The UCSC team members have delivered presentations at 42 local and national conferences in total. University of Birmingham team members have delivered four presentations about the project at student conferences and to teachers and school staff working with people with Autism, reaching over 500 people through this. The Autism Education Trust (AET) delivered a presentation to their expert reference group made up of stakeholders, representatives from the Department for Education (DfE) and practitioners. Each of the European partners has also promoted the project at conferences and seminars. This included an oral presentation at the *5th Hellenic Autism Conference*. Team members have also presented the project internationally. This has included in *Sao Paolo, Brazil, in March, 2015; Bejing, November 2015; Varese, September 2015 and Doha 2017.*

9.2.5.Open access

The most important mechanism for promoting open access to our intellectual outputs is through our resource based website, which is itself an intellectual output. The URL for this is www.transformautismeducation.org

We also promote free access to the intellectual outputs through our University website and by uploading the intellectual outputs onto the dissemination platform, as well as providing links to our organisation websites. The Autism Education Trust materials, on which the Transform

Autism Education intellectual outputs were based, all have Open Government Licences, and our contract with the AET allowed the translation and adaptation of the materials. We do not wish to encourage anyone to use the training materials to train others though, unless they have participated in 'train the trainer' events, as we plan to develop a system of licensed training in order to protect the quality assurance of the training that is delivered.

9.3. Potential to use the approach of TAE in other projects on a larger scale

There is huge potential to use the lessons from the TAE project on a larger scale and in a different geographical area. Aspects of our methodology that has the potential to be useful for other countries includes:

i) the notion of engaging in research to determine the knowledge levels and training needs of schools staff before developing training programmes;

ii) gathering a cross section of the community in order to ensure that the materials draw on a number of knowledge bases and are relevant to practitioners and

iii) building a community of practice consisting of passionate stakeholders, including autistic people, families and professionals working together.

The notion of developing tiers of training, from awareness raising to more in-depth training is also crucial to this model as it enables the development of a groups of practitioners who can become autism champions through 'train the trainer' sessions. These people can in turn cascade their knowledge to larger numbers of educators, families and autistic people and thus build the capacity for the development of inclusive practice. We believe such a model could be useful to people in a number of countries.

Part of the vision of the project is to continue the work that has been developed by researching the impact of the programme on i) the development and practice of teachers and ii) the learning of pupils. We also wish to extend what we have learnt from this project, to develop models for organisations and individuals in other countries to employ. We have already undertaken a project for the World Innovation Summit for Education (WISE) in Qatar, which conducted research on how to improve autism education there. One of the recommendations in this report is for the development of a community of practice in Qatar that develops training and materials that are contextually relevant to that context. We are also in discussions with colleagues at ELTE University in Budapest, Hungary, who came to our final conference in Milan.

In order to move forward, we plan to submit further funding bids to i) continue the collaboration with our colleagues in Greece and Italy by conducting research through case studies of schools and children to capture the impact of the project longitudinally; ii) extend a similar project to other countries in the European Union and beyond. Plans include setting up a social enterprise through which this work can be promoted, and the initial preparation work for this has been undertaken.

10. SUSTAINABILITY

As a result of the project, we have trained school staff in a number of schools in Greece and Italy. The training will continue to be delivered by trainers after the EU funding has ended so the materials developed throughout the project will continue to be used. The overall website will be sustained and developed by ACER staff after the project is completed, with UCSC and ALF maintaining the website in Greece and Italy respectively. The resources and outputs will also remain available on the website for practitioners in a number of countries to download and use.

Partners have developed models to make the training self-sustaining. Sustainability of the programme has clearly been a challenge in the current financial and social Greek reality. However, the positive feedback and the great response of the trainees, has brought out the need to continue the programme. The Aikaterini Laskaridou Foundation will fund the programme the following year. Level One will be delivered to trainees without a participation fee. The other Levels will be delivered with a small fee – 20 euros per participant. Level One training will continue to be delivered in schools whereas Level Two and Three will be held at the Foundation with each level broken down in two afternoon sessions.

The aim will be for each group of participants to continue the cycle of training and two follow up sessions will be available per school to make sure that there is support available to the participants who complete Levels Two and Three. These sessions can also be used to help the Head teacher and teachers to complete the competency and standard documents that have been translated to Greek. The aim will also be to train as many teachers as possible to become trainers and to continue working with the School District Heads in determining the training needs of each school district, to deliver and follow up the training in the best possible way.

Sustainability of the training will happen in the following way in Italy: In the province of Monza and Brianza there are three hubs on special needs (CTI, Territorial Center for Inclusion), in three different places geographically located in the central, eastern and western parts of the county. Other centres on autism are active thanks to researchers and support teachers that specialise in autism as well as parents' association. Every year they organise meetings, trainings, conferences and offer a front desk for people who need help on this subject. This project has enable six teachers to be trained according to the UK model and two teachers have received training on managing the website. These teachers are contact persons of the territorial Center and can disseminate the tools, the results and the outputs of the project, inside and outside their schools and centres.

In the province of Monza and Brianza there are two hubs located in two schools (Istituto "Mosè Bianchi" in Monza and "Liceo Modigliani" in Giussano) that are also responsible for the training of all teachers, in order to their needs. Every year, all schools define a training plan

based on the analysis of teachers' needs and, among the others, the subject. The numbers of students with autism are increasing and teachers have made it clear that they need specific skills to teach these pupils. Thanks to this European project, the Scholastic Office can now offer six trainers who can delivery the three levels of the TAE training.

Through the support of University researchers (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore) Ufficio scolastico feel that the training course delivered during the project life only in the primary school can be adapted and applied to students of different ages, both in the secondary and in the high schools.

The CeDisMa team will sustain promoting and delivering the training to single schools (attended by children with autism); networks of schools (called ambit territoriali - 35 ambiti in Lombardia) and provincial Hubs (Sportelli Provinciali Autismo – 5 hubs in which UCSC is already involved). The cost of the training will be €1500 for the three levels of training, and the aims are to involve 150 people in level one training, 15 teams in Level Three training, and 15 team representatives (head masters, SEN coordinators and teachers) in level 3 training. Furthermore, there will be activities to sustain the teachers who have already been training by engaging them in 'train the trainer' activities. The CeDisMa team are also going to employ someone to coordinate website development and maintenance and to connect this work to other work in the country. There will be monthly updates on news, link updates and new materials.

The Transform Autism website is a key aspect of the dissemination and sustainability of the project. We have developed a modern, user friendly and inclusive website that will build on and extend the work of the TAE project. There is the capacity to add content and resources to the website to ensure it remains up to date and relevant for the needs of each partner country.

11.CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In summary, the Transform Autism Education project has been a highly successful project that has led to demonstrable impact on the team members involved in it, the organisations they work for, and the stakeholders they engage with. The project has generated a number of valuable intellectual outputs and ways of working which are likely to continue making an impact on the field of autism education locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

The achievements of the project exceeded initial expectations in relation to the quality of the outputs; the impact of the project on team members; the engagement and participation of a strong network of people and the reach to broader audiences. The materials and resources created by the project are available on the Erasmus Plus Dissemination platform: http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/
Many are also available on the project website
site: www.transformautismeducation.org

transform autism education

ERASMUS PLUS

KA2: COOPERATION AND INNOVATION FOR GOOD PRACTICES

Transform Autism Education | Final Report

Guldberg, K., Achtypi, A., Angelidi, E., Baker, L., Bradley, R., Colombo, M., Critchley, S-J., Cumino, R., D'Alonzo, L., Folci,I., Giouroukou, E., Hadjipateras-Giannoulis, K., Huggett, S., Kerem, M., Kokounaras-Liagkis, M., Kossyvaki, A, Laskaridou, K., Milton, D., Molteni, P., Sala, R., Simpson, P., Sofianopolou, K., Wood, R., Zanfroni, E.

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