

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES TO SOCIAL INCLUSION FOR AUTISTIC CHILDREN

José L. Cuesta Gómez¹, María Fernández Hawrylak¹, Claudia Grau Rubio²,
Ascensión Doñate-Martínez², Jorge Garcés Ferrer²

¹ Polibienestar Research Institute – Affiliated Unity from the University of Burgos (SPAIN)

² Polibienestar Research Institute – University of Valencia (SPAIN)

Abstract

The prevalence rate of autism disorders has dramatically increased during the last years. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention from Atlanta estimates that about 1 in 68 children have been identified with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Children with ASD present problems with social, emotional and communication skills in their daily life. Moreover, they present difficulties since early childhood in key areas for learning and development processes. Due to these characteristics most of children with ASD need specific programmes of educative inclusion; in this sense, early action and care is very important to favor a positive long-term development, as well as their inclusion into society.

The project entitled “Equal Opportunities to Social Inclusion for Autistic Children, EOSIAC”, funded under the Grundtvig programme from the European Commission (ref. 2013-1-RO1-GRU06-29490) is mainly aimed to support the integration of children between 5 and 10 years old with autism in public education. Through this transnational project professionals from different fields involved in the care of autism from different countries (Romania, Spain, Italy, Germany, Turkey and Bulgaria) are exchanging knowledge and best practices aimed to create a network of specialized educators and counselors. This point is very relevant as it entails an empowerment of professionals in this field through the acquisition of more knowledge about educative inclusion of ASD based in the different realities from several European contexts.

Within the project, Polibienestar Research Institute (www.polibienestar.org) is in charge of the development of a methodology for integrating the phenomenon of autistic children in public education that can be applied successfully in each country participating in the project. These methodological guidelines will be based in references and good practices with scientific evidence, taking into consideration a revision of recent researches, initiatives and legislation frameworks. The methodology will contain the main basis for an effective integration of children and it will be easy-to-adapt to different cultural, educative and legislative contexts.

Other relevant products of the project will be the development of guidelines for parents of children with ASD to help them in the care of their children; and guidelines for teachers providing knowledge and skills on integration.

So, through the involvement of parents of children with ASD and their teachers it is expected that the project has a real impact on children's quality of life and wellbeing.

Keywords: Autism spectrum disorder (ASD), children, social inclusion, education, Europe.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Conceptualization of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Currently within the term Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) it is included a heterogeneous group of chronic neurodevelopment disturbances with a biologic origin, which distinctive symptomatology includes, besides a disorder in the social-communicative development and a limited pattern of activities and interests, other kinds of clinic symptoms that hugely varies from a person to other [1, 2, 3].

Independently of the existence of associated mental disability, all people with ASD share common characteristics in key areas for the development, as communication social interaction and imagination [2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8].

According to the main international researches on ASD, the prevalence of this kind of disorders has significantly increased in the last years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in EEUU (MMRW) has recently published last data of ASD prevalence at age of 8 years old, from a study in 14 North-American States. Currently the prevalence of ASD is on average of 11.3 cases per every 1,000 people; which means an increase of 78% since 2002 and of 23% since 2006.

1.2 Autism and educative inclusion

Most of the national and international educative policies emphasize the relevance and right to education of people with disability as a mean to achieve the principles of equal opportunities and non-discrimination contemplated on the International Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities. In the Article 24 the Convention encourages a right to inclusive education for all people with disability [9].

In the field of autism, education began to be considered as a specific intervention in the 80s, when autism became to be understood since a developmental perspective as disorder of the development [8]. Currently, education is considered as the best tool of development for people with ASD and it is understood as an intervention with a comprehensive approach. So, education must take into consideration the necessary supports in inclusive environments and must be addressed to the training of adaptive skills to help people being as independent as possible in different contexts and activities of daily life achieving, so, significant results that answer personal interests [10, 11].

Intervention with people with ASD must cover different needs of the person in different environments along their life cycle, promoting a positive personal and social development, and an improvement in his/her quality of life as well in its different dimensions [12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18].

The Guide for teachers of students with autism, developed by the 'Federación Autismo Castilla y León' in 2013 (Spain) considers [19]:

"it is important to open the school to the community, the incorporation of a model of competences at school follows the functionality in the learning for social inclusion of all the students. But, inclusion is something else than a research line, is something else than a simple curricular adaptation and even is something else than a philosophy. Inclusion is a value judgment, a right and a way to improve the quality of life, in which education can play an essential role offering the same opportunities to all the students, conceiving flexible methods of educative care, addressed to work since the specificity of needs that represent the student body."

1.3 Educative inclusion of students with ASD in Europe

The situation of autism in the different European Member States evidences very different levels of development and knowledge. In spite of the regulatory framework and of the international recommendations, the different national policies and the situation in every country difficult the implementation of common action strategies and systems that guarantee the universal right that, as individuals, have people with ASD to receive an inclusive education.

In this context it is necessary to spread a rigorous knowledge about the nature of autism and, as [20] affirm, to train in models of intervention based on good practices that contribute to remove wrong perspectives about this disability and to guide towards effective interventions.

2 THE PROJECT: EOSIAC

Based on the previous facts it was proposed the project objective of this paper: "*Equal Opportunities for Social Inclusion of Autistic Children*" (EOSIAC). It is funded within the Grundtvig programme from the European Commission (ref. 2013-1-RO1-GRU06-29490), with a length of two years from November 2013 to November 2015.

The project also involves other relevant stakeholders from local, regional national and international communities and policy makers specialized on issues as childhood, autism, education as well as models of inclusion.

2.1 Objectives

2.1.1 General objectives

The general objectives of the EOSIAC project are:

- a) Supporting parents of children with autism in their integration in public education, and providing parental counselling.
- b) Provision of expert advice through the organization of training sessions and the provision of best practice models for teachers in educative centres in need of inclusion approaches.
- c) Provision of theoretical and practical skills to parents encouraging their active involvement as 'therapists' in the rehabilitation and integration of their children in public education.
- d) Development of activities of support for parents, as workshops, support groups or parental counselling.
- e) Study of the phenomenon of autism in every participating country: prevalence, state of the art on their inclusion in public education centres, legislative framework in the field of children's protection or disability and good practices.
- f) Exchange of best practices between multidisciplinary professionals involved in the care of children with autism.

2.1.2 Specific objectives:

And the specific objectives to be carried out within the project plan are:

- a) Development of awareness campaigns involving different relevant stakeholders in the field of care of children with autism.
- b) Provision of information and counselling to teachers and other professionals.
- c) Implementation of a methodology focused on the integration of children with autism in public educative centres.
- d) Identification of educative centres that may be able to carry out strategies for the inclusion of children with autism.
- e) Creation of a network of professionals specialized in resources, services, treatment and care of child with autism.
- f) Preparation of guidelines with good practices addressed to parents of children with autism.
- g) Preparation of guidelines with good practices addressed to teachers from public education.

2.2 Consortium

The consortium of the project is based on the participation of six European countries: Romania, Spain, Germany, Italy, Turkey and Bulgaria. The participating entities are the following:

- **Save the Children – Dolj (Romania)** – coordinator of the project. It is a non-governmental, democratic, independent, non-profit, non-political and non-religious Romanian organization set-up in 1990. The mission of the organization is to promote and defend children's rights. The areas of expertise of Save the Children are: children's protection against discrimination, exploitation, violence or other forms of abuse; development of programmes which aim to ensure all the conditions necessary for every child to be respected and appreciated; activities of research, monitoring and informing about child's rights; assistance for children in difficulty: refugee children, abused or neglected children, abandoned children, children with disabilities, drug addicted children and children with HIV/AIDS.
- **Polibienestar Research Institute – University of Valencia (Spain)**. It is a Public Research Institute led by Jordi Garcés, Prince of Asturias Distinguished Visiting Professor at Georgetown University. It is specialized in multidisciplinary research, innovation and social technology, technical advice and training in the field of public policies. Its final mission is the improvement of the Welfare and Quality of Life of society. Polibienestar has a wide experience in R&D projects, with a history of coordination and participation in more than 40 regional, national and European projects.

- ***Innovation in Learning Institute (ILI) at the Friedrich-Alexander University of Erlangen-Nuremberg (Germany)***. ILI is specialized in working on media and network-based learning and qualification systems in the context of lifelong learning. It has extensively been involved in European R&D Projects in the field of innovative learning technologies, and develops networks based on learning systems (content, technology, support, organization, evaluation) in the context of adult education for different target groups.
- ***ASIS (Italy)***. Consortium of Social Cooperatives constituted by 7 local consortia for a total of about 100 social cooperatives. ASIS works to improve the professional development and management skills of social enterprises managers and workers. Since it was born, ASIS has been running activities in the following sectors: training for social enterprise managers; financial consultancy for social enterprises; networking project at regional, national and European level; and research in the field of social economy.
- ***Silifke Özel Eğitim Uygulama Merkezi (Turkey)***. Silifke Special Education Implementation Center is the only public institution providing education to children with mental disability and autism, and also support to their parents in Silifke district. It is a non-profit, public institution, which main tasks are: provision of early childhood education to both children with mental disabilities and autism from 0 to 36 months old; pre-school education of this children from 36 to 60 months old; primary education to this children from 60 months to 14 years old; and support to parents.
- ***Bulgarian Dyslexia Association- Rousse (Bulgary)***. It is a non-profit organization funded by parents of children with dyslexia, teachers and experts in other spheres with the aim of supporting people with dyslexia.

3 METHODOLOGY

The core of the methodology employed within the project is based on information, communication and exchange of best practices and knowledge between the different target groups and stakeholders of the project. Thus, parents, teachers, policy makers and other experts and professionals will help to tackle the problems associated with the lack of educative inclusion policies and practices around Europe.

3.1 State of the art at national level

In the first stage of the project, partners analyzed the current state of every national context related to autism (providing data and current statistics), their legal framework about the protection of childhood or people with disabilities. Moreover, every national entity showed the measures currently running about educative inclusion in their contexts.

3.2 Analysis of teachers' and parents' perceptions and needs

In order to analyze the current perceptions and needs of both teachers working with children with autism and parents of these children, the consortium has carried out a research on primary sources. For this aim it was developed two questionnaires with closed and opened questions which were fulfilled by around 50 teachers and 50 parents from all the countries involved in the project. The data have been useful for the development of the guides for teachers and parents as they reflect the current state and needs of these target groups in the involved national settings.

3.3 Guide for teachers

The guide offers best practices and tips on the integration of children with autism in public education addressed for teachers and special educators working in public schools. This product will help professionals to understand the ASD and their implications in the education and social interaction with their schoolmates.

3.4 Guide for parents

This guide is an easy and accessible tool aimed to provide an answer to the questions that parents of children with autism face every day. In this sense, it provides skills and knowledge to promote a higher autonomy and security in the care of their children, as well as information about their integration in public education.

3.5 Methodology for social inclusion

It will be developed a methodology for integrating children with autism in public educative centres gathering general and specific aspects that can be applied successfully in each country participating in the project; as well as in other Member States.

3.6 Organization of events

The core of the project is based on the organization of regular meetings around the different European countries involved in. In these workshops there are representatives from every participating entity, with the participation of multidisciplinary professionals in the field of R&D and autism; and the involvement of other relevant local stakeholders as parents. Meetings mean an opportunity to exchange knowledge, best practices and discussion about the inclusion of children with autism into the society. Moreover in every local site participants visit different kind of centres and resources in which children with autism – and other disabilities – receive education and care.

4 DISCUSSION

In the last years it has been evidenced a significant increase in the prevalence of ASD and the recognition of this disorder as a disability with its own entity and the specific necessities required for a specialized intervention in adapted contexts. Only since a specific approach it can be guaranteed a better prognosis and evolution of the person with ASD, as it exists direct relation between the kind of care received and the moment in which this is started, with the impact of their development and quality of life.

Since some decades ago educative intervention is considered the best tool of development for people with ASD, and this must be based on knowledge on the psychological functioning, on the key characteristics and on the different styles and cognitive levels of every person. These issues direct to the necessity of a highly specialized and specified education developed mainly in inclusive environments to guarantee the functionality and generalization of learnings.

According to the guidelines elaborated by the 'Federación Autismo Castilla y León' (2013) [19], it is important taking into consideration the special vulnerability of students with ASD to suffer exclusion situations and bullying. Since the model of inclusive education the compromise is to admit every student and to work together to make the right of every children to education and inclusion reality. In order to achieve this it is necessary to know and to pay special attention to the relations established within the classroom, working with all the student body and, since early ages, working in the acquisition of values of understanding, respect to differences and solidarity as a way to prevent situations as exclusion or bullying. Only based on these conditions it will be facilitated that students with ASD acquire the necessary functional abilities for the participation in the community life with a maximum personal development in every life environments.

To carry out an effective inclusive education it is essential the training of teachers on characteristics, methodologies and effective educative resources for the students with ASD. The collaboration between teachers, special education teachers, psychopedagogic teams, the school as a whole, parents and community associations is very relevant too. Finally, it is also necessary to work towards awareness both in the classmates and all the educative community, since the management team from the school until the public educative administrations [21].

The diversity in the reference models – some without the support of scientific evidence –, the necessity of specialized training in the professional sphere and the different ideas and level of inclusion around European countries make necessary the establishment of networks of exchange, agreement and generalization of good practices [22, 23].

Thus, the project EOSIAC is useful to encourage good practices of educative inclusion in all the participating countries, both in which are beginning in this field as well as in those having a more consolidated trajectory, and to raise awareness in different stakeholders – teachers, parents and public administrations – on the relevance of implementing this kind of practices. Moreover, this project means enrichment to all participants in the discussion of information, sharing experiences and development of effective strategies for the different contexts.

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