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Ready  
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# Needs Assessment Report



## PROJECT NAME

### Teaching School Readiness Through an ABA-based Preschool Programme

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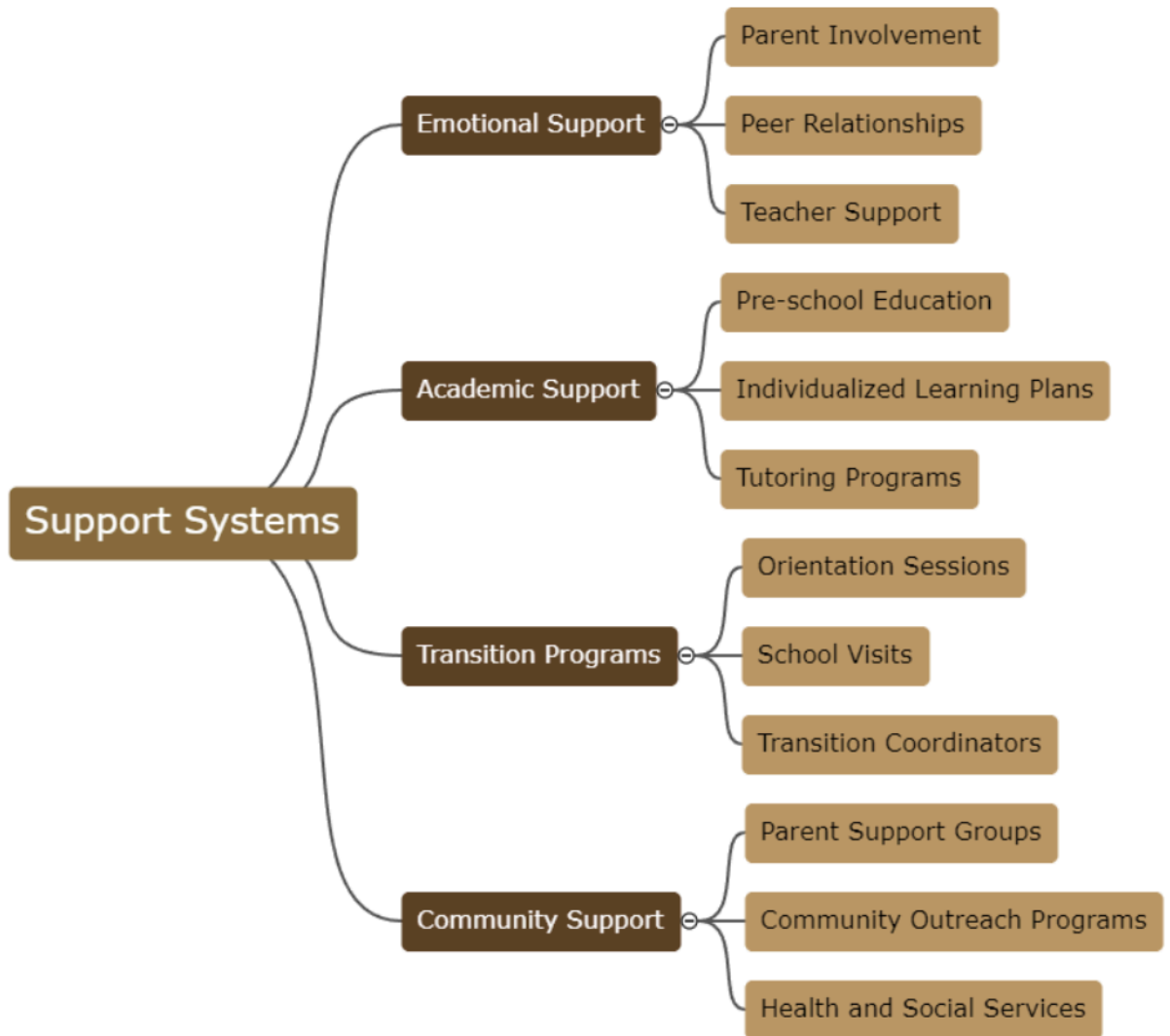


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## Project Overview

Facilitating a successful transition for autistic children into the primary school environment requires the development and cooperation of numerous support systems.



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The Ready4School project is a collaboration between six European organizations to develop and implement an innovative educational kit for preschool teachers working with children with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) as part of the more comprehensive support system. The project aims to increase the quality of special and inclusive preschool programs for children with ASD, and facilitate transition from preschool to primary education.

The project will develop a comprehensive assessment and programming educational kit based on the principles of applied behavior analysis (ABA). The kit will include:

- A developmental assessment with school readiness checkpoints.
- An assessment-based preschool teaching curriculum.
- Detailed lesson plans following the teaching curriculum.
- Data sheets for successful monitoring and evaluation of progress.

The project will also train 3 trainers per country on the developed material (pilot-testing) who will then train a minimum of 5 teachers in their countries. Beyond that, the project aims to disseminate the results through a variety of channels, including publications, presentations, and workshops.

## Needs Assessment Overview

A needs assessment was conducted to identify the key challenges faced by preschool teachers working with children with ASD. The assessment involved a review of the literature and in-depth interviews with teachers and experts in the six partner countries. The interviews were conducted in the local language, when applicable, audio recorded, transcribed, then translated into English, if needed, before being reviewed manually and with machine assistance for overarching themes.

It was anticipated that the needs assessment would reveal global gaps in areas such as:

- Lack of training and resources: Teachers may lack the training and resources they need to understand and implement effective ABA-based interventions/best teaching practices with autistic children.
- Limited access to evidence-based practices: There may be a lack of access to evidence-based practices for children with ASD in preschool settings.
- Difficulties in assessing and monitoring progress: Teachers may find it difficult to assess and monitor the progress of children with ASD without specialized training and resources.
- Challenges in transitioning children to primary school: There may be challenges in supporting a successful and collaborative transition of children with ASD from preschool to primary school.

The goal of the needs assessment was to make the project community-driven by having the results guide the project team in developing a comprehensive assessment and programming educational kit for preschool teachers working with children with ASD.

## Needs Assessment Results

Recent global research conducted by expert teams such as Rees and colleagues (2023), Hálfdanardóttir and colleagues (2021), and Gunning and colleagues (2019) have found that for children to be successful in primary school certain key skills are needed, such as functional communication, instruction-following, sharing with others, self-help, being able to sit still, acknowledging and complimenting others, and waiting for a teacher's attention. All of these teams, and numerous others, have found the value in using a standardized preschool life skills (PLS) program (e.g., Hanley et al., 2007) to support the development of such key foundations. This project's needs assessment results draw similar conclusions.

### Czech Republic

Background:

- Czech doctor of special education and Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA) with 13 years experience (10 with ASD).

Preschool Education:

- Framework programs exist but are not standardized, requiring teachers to create their own materials.
- Data collection and ABA-based teaching are crucial, but require training for teachers.
- Quality preschools require educated teachers and autism awareness.

Children with ASD:

- Nothing specific for children with ASD.
- Individualized program based on assessments and data.
- Transition to school requires group work, change tolerance, communication skills, and behavior control.

Transition:



- Increased demands and organization in the primary school transition pose difficulties.
- Clear plans and collaboration are key for a smooth transition.

## Recommendations:

- More support for teachers with integrated students.
- Training on data collection, ABA-based strategies, and autism spectrum disorders.
- Standardized assessments and program development/transition plan for children with ASD.
- Making the preschool setting look more like the primary school setting.

## North Macedonia

### Background:

- 17 years experience in early childhood education and working with autistic children.

### Preschool Education:

- Follows a standardized curriculum; without space for differentiation.
- Challenges addressing individual needs of all learners.
- Assessment not done regularly (i.e., only when finishing preschool).
- Need for more resources and training for teachers.
- Lack of qualified professionals and space to accommodate all preschoolers.

### Children with ASD:

- No specific teaching resources/curriculum for autistic preschool children.
- Barriers of lacking professionals, ABA/autism training, and classroom space.

### Transition:

- Need for flexible preschool materials and smooth transition strategies.
- Start the transition process earlier.

### Recommendations:

- More flexible preschool curricular materials for autistic children.



- Cooperation between preschool and primary school educators for smooth transition.
- Increased resources and training for teachers working with autistic children.

## Cyprus

### Background

- A special education teacher in Cyprus with over 20 years of experience. She currently works in both preschool and primary schools.

### Preschool Education:

- Standardized curriculum.
- Lack of assessment for use by regular education teachers.
- Materials may be outdated.
- Special education teacher, who visits the classrooms, and is more responsible for supporting children with autism than the regular education teacher.
- Lack of resources and training (what exists is optional).
- Large class sizes.
- Lack of specialized resources.

### Children with ASD:

- Teachers are unsure how to deal with sensory sensitivities, behavioral issues, or how to implement ABA-based strategies.
- Classroom physical space is an issue.
- More parental involvement needed.

### Recommendations:

- Developing a more flexible curriculum.
- Implementing a standardized assessment system.
- Providing mandatory training for teachers on special education.
- Reducing class sizes.
- Providing more specialized resources.
- Training for regular education teachers in special education instead of relying on the limited push-in special education teacher approach.



## Croatia

### Background:

- Educational rehabilitator and director at Center for Autism, Zagreb, working at the center for over 30 years.

### Preschool Education:

- National curriculum encourages independent thinking and inclusion.
- Comprehensive portfolio-based assessment.
- Need for better equity or services throughout all of Croatia.

### Children with ASD:

- Benefit from visual learning and individualized approaches.
- Teachers and support staff need specialized training.
- Need to review the impact of overly intensive services/use of specialized services that take away from other childhood experiences.

### Transition:

- Hindered by inadequate assessments and lacking specialized teacher training.
- Requires comprehensive transition program for child, parents, environment, teachers, and administrators- which is currently missing in Croatia.
- Collaboration between preschool and primary school educators is crucial.

### Recommendations:

- Develop stronger assessments for children with autism, focusing on individual needs and strengths.
- Implement comprehensive transition programs with dedicated resources and staff training.
- Foster stronger collaboration between preschool and primary school educators, prioritizing communication and information sharing.
- Provide targeted training for teachers and support staff on autism spectrum disorders and effective teaching strategies.

## Ukraine

### Background:



- Director of an inclusive resource center for children with autism with over 10 years of experience.

## Preschool Education:

- Differing options for curricular programs for preschool in general and autism specifically.
- The general education program does not have specific modifications for children with autism.
- Need for more specialized teachers and resources.
- Importance of increasing progress monitoring and interactive/technological tools.

## Children with ASD:

- Benefit from specialized training for teachers.
- Need support for transitioning to primary school.

## Transition:

- Needed collaboration between the schools, educators, and children in both settings before the transition takes place.
- Focus on building verbal and nonverbal communication, social skills, and schedule following.
- Preparation for/desensitization to new environmental and sensory experiences before the transition.

## Recommendations:

- Increase availability of specialized teachers and resources.
- Provide training for teachers on autism on how to use interactive teaching methods/technology.
- Develop collaborative transition programs between preschools and primary schools.
- Emphasize communication and collaboration between teachers and specialists.

## Greece

### Background:



- Kindergarten teacher with a master's degree in special education with 10 years in the field.

## Preschool Education:

- Good theoretical standardized curriculum, but hard to put in practice, especially with the challenges of overcrowded classrooms and diverse learners.
- Teachers need to make curricular modifications themselves.
- Lack of individualized support and assessment tools (no official assessment tools).
- Limited resources and training for teachers.

## Children with ASD:

- Need for specialized program (curriculum and assessment) from Ministry of Education for children with autism.
- Importance of specialized teacher training.
- Under-staffing of special education teachers.
- Delays in outside of school assessments.

## Transition:

- School readiness assessment for a smooth transition to primary school.
- Socialization and collaboration between early childhood and primary educators.
- Visits to the new site before the transition.

## Recommendations:

- Ministry of Education provide specialized program for children with autism.
- Increase training and ongoing support for teachers.
- Provide appropriate equipment, resources, and assessment tools.
- Develop school readiness assessment and guidelines for a smooth transition program.
- Foster socialization and emotional regulation.

## Overall Conclusions

Across all six nations it was confirmed that there are a number of barriers that children with autism face when it comes to accessing primary education.



- Inadequate assessment of strengths: Children with autism often do not receive adequate assessments of their strengths and abilities, which can lead to them being placed in inappropriate educational settings that are not equipped to meet their needs.
- Lack of preparation for the transition to primary school: Children with autism often do not receive adequate preparation for the transition to primary school, which can lead to them feeling overwhelmed, anxious, and struggling to find success.
- Physical barriers: Children with autism may face physical barriers in the primary school environment, such as loud noises, crowded classrooms, and a lack of visual organization.
- Curriculum adaptation and modification: Children with autism may need modifications to the curriculum in order to access the general education curriculum.
- Specialized teacher training: Children with autism do not have regular access to professionals with necessary training and expertise.

Country	Preschool Education	Children with ASD	Transition
Czech Republic	Framework programs not standardized; ABA training needed	Individualized programs; Challenges in school transition	Difficulties in primary school transition; Collaboration is key
North Macedonia	Standardized curriculum lacks differentiation; Lack of resources	No specific resources for autistic preschoolers; Transition challenges	Need for flexible materials; Earlier transition process



Cyprus	Standardized curriculum lacks assessment; Lack of resources	Teachers unsure about ASD; Lack of parental involvement	Need for flexible curriculum; Earlier transition
Croatia	National curriculum with portfolio assessment; Inequity in services	Visual learning benefits; Need for specialized training	Hindered by inadequate assessments; Comprehensive transition needed
Greece	Theoretical curriculum, challenging to implement; Lack of support	Need for specialized program; Importance of training	School readiness assessment; Socialization and collaboration

A number of valuable recommendations were provided by interviewees for addressing these barriers:

- Collaboration between preschool and primary school educators: Collaboration between preschool and primary school educators can help ensure that children with autism are prepared for the transition to primary school.
- Training for teachers and staff: Teachers and staff need training to understand autism and how to best support children with autism in the classroom/use of empirically validated training procedures.



- Flexible learning environments: Children with autism may need flexible learning environments that are tailored to their individual needs.
- Visual supports and other individualized learning materials: Children with autism may benefit from visual supports, such as schedules, maps, and pictures, to help them understand and navigate their environment, and the use of other individualized learning tools.
- Curriculum and assessment: Teachers need guidance on what to teach and what/how to assess to best meet the needs of children with autism.
- Teaching targets focus: While academic skills are important they were never mentioned as the primary focus. Rather, things like social skills, communication, and emotional regulation were more often mentioned as needing to be built.

## Moving Forward

In accordance with the local experts interviewed, the project team should aim to support preschool teachers with the following resources and training to effectively implement the preschool curricular materials:

- Curriculum materials that are designed for all learners, including children with autism or other special needs.
- Training on how to adapt the curriculum materials to meet the needs of all learners.
- Training on how to use different teaching methods and strategies to reach all learners.
- Access to resources and support, such as professional development opportunities, consultation with specialists, and peer collaboration.

The experts also emphasized that preschool teachers need to be flexible and willing to adapt their teaching methods to meet the needs of individual learners. They also need to be patient and understanding, and have a positive attitude towards children with autism or other special needs.

Additionally, the development of the project's preschool classroom curriculum, assessment tool, lesson plans, and supporting materials, should be guided by the experts interviewed, targeting building the following specific skills and abilities in autistic children to prepare them to enter primary school:



- **Social skills:** Autistic children should be able to interact with their peers in a socially appropriate manner, follow directions/classroom rules, work cooperatively in groups, wait in line, and share.
- **Communication skills:** Autistic children should be able to communicate their needs and wants clearly, both verbally and nonverbally (e.g., ask for help).
- **Executive functioning skills:** Autistic children should be able to manage their time and activities (e.g., with visual schedules), follow a schedule, and problem-solve.
- **Sensory processing skills:** Autistic children should be able to cope with different sensory inputs, such as noise, light, and touch, without engaging in dangerous behaviors (e.g., self-initiated coping strategy usage).
- **Adaptability:** Autistic children should be able to adapt to new situations and changes in routine.
- **Social-emotional well being:** Autistic children should have some skills to help alleviate anxiety in the new setting, calm themselves, reduce fears, and engage with others when desired.





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