



BUSTA (BUILDING SKILLS THROUGH TRAINING THERAPY ANIMALS) PROJECT IMPACT REPORT



2023

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Introduction

The BUSTA (Building Skills through Training therapy Animals) project is a partnership project between six organisations in three different countries - Belgium, Lithuania and Bulgaria. Three schools and three associations worked upon creating alternative school programs and educational approaches including activity sessions with therapy animals. The project was flexible for the setting and conditions every school has. This allowed teachers and therapists in every country to develop programs and to conduct activities that are appropriate for the children they worked with. The project highlighted the acquisition of 21st century lifelong learning skills when the kids participate in the training process of the therapy animals. Moreover, it was also an opportunity for the students to take part in co-creating new training exercises through the process of designing new training games to train the animals to respond to specific needs from a disabled beneficiaries.

The main requirement of the project is that the students participated voluntarily in the offered activities, their opinion and rights were respected.

Three project results were fulfilled:

Project Result 1 is a documentary, presenting the conducted activities with the therapy animals. Students, teachers and therapists were involved in its creation as actors, video capturing and editing.

The teachers and therapists were responsible to explore the new skills of the involved students' development and to collect all the information about in the **Project Result 2** - The Impact report.

Based on observations and acquired experience, the partners created a Guide book - **Project Result 3**, to assist organisations working with people with special needs and schools that would like to include similar activities in their educational programs.

In each of the countries, the students had the opportunity to get to know different therapy animals - in Lithuania there were dolphins, in Belgium there was a dog, in Bulgaria - horses. As a subsequent step, students, teachers and therapists could exchange their experiences during the three Learning, Training, Teaching meetings that were held in each of the partners' countries.

In addition to being really useful and enriching the work of each organisation, the project opened up new opportunities for future partnerships and development of new activities.



Methodology

The methodology used in the Impact and Reproducibility Report is a case study of the tangible efforts made by organisations in a specific setting, with a focus on the students they worked with. This approach has been carefully made to provide a comprehensive analysis of the impact and outcomes of these efforts, as well as their potential for replication in other schools. Through these innovative and context specific approaches, we aim to provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of these initiatives, and to help organisations identify areas for improvement and growth. Our report is grounded in a professional and objective tone, and is designed to provide actionable recommendations that can be used to enhance the quality and impact of educational programs and initiatives.

Partner schools and organisations

The Lithuanian Sea Museum is a multifaceted organisation that combines various branches of activities, including historical and biological museum exhibitions, rescue projects for Baltic Sea seals and dolphins, and Dolphin assisted therapy centre methodology. The Ministry of Culture oversees the historical and biological exhibitions, while the Ministry of Environment collaborates on the rescue projects, and the Ministry of Health collaborates on the Dolphin-assisted therapy program.

The Dolphin Assisted Therapy Center, which opened in 2015, is one of the most popular holistic support and innovative training centres in Europe, offering counselling services, formal agreements and teaching courses with universities, including Klaipeda University, Siauliai University, Lithuanian University of Health Sciences, and Vilnius University.

The Lithuanian Sea Museum has two decades experience in providing counselling services for people with disabilities, and its creative and innovative approach was recognized within a governmental innovation program in 2017. Key personnel involved in the project include Professor Dr. Brigita Kreiviniene, head and creator of the Dolphin-Assisted Therapy Center, who has scientific interests in neuropsychology, disability aspects, complementary and alternative medicine and has participated in several national and international research projects. The organisation has human resources, vision, and experience in creating collaborative and expertise teams for projects. Staff members who are working on the project activities are members of respected international organisations, including the European Association of Aquatic Mammals, the Association of Human-Animal Interaction, and the Network of Sensory Integration.

The partner school in Lithuania is a Montessori school and kinder-garden located in Klaipeda. Montessori pedagogical methodology seeks to support cognitive, social, emotional and individual needs of a child. Through the partnership with the Lithuanian Sea Museum the students are experiencing what Dolphin assisted therapy is. At the Montessori school, there is a class of students in the fourth grade involved in the project.

The partner school in Bulgaria is the Democratic school in Sofia, Community for Democratic Education. Based on the principles of self-directed education, the school gives every child the opportunity to learn what and how they want to. Within the project, a group of students, between 11 and 13 years old, are visiting the Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation ranch. They had the opportunity to experience close contact with the therapy horses, understand and reinforce their training through various games, and also to observe and take part in therapy sessions with children with special needs. The main values of PQHF are: good treatment of horses and other animals; raising and caring for horses and other animals in a way close to their natural environment and ethology; no violence and no training aids that degrade and infringe the integrity of the horse or inflict any pain; partnering with horses in therapeutic sessions in a safe and beneficial manner.

BOS/QUEST & DYADIS

In Belgium, **QUEST**'s Brussels democratic school project **BOS** upholds the same principles as **Community for Democratic Education**, based on the principles of self-directed education. Within the project, a group of students, between 08 and 12 years old, received visits in their school from Aika, a therapy dog in training, under the guidance of Dyadis organisation. Dyadis is an associate partner of the project and specialises in training dogs to assist people with motor disabilities or with autism. Additionally to the school visits, one student hosted the dog for 2 weeks within their home, with the instructions to reinforce the social skills of the dog, as well as a list of basic commands that the dog needs to be trained to fulfil, that will be essential for the assistance of the future beneficiary. The students had the opportunity to experience interacting with the dog, and also to observe and reinforce the training the dog had already integrated.

EASPD, a non-profit NGO in the disability sector, promotes the views of over 20,000 social services and their umbrella associations by promoting equal opportunities for people with disabilities through effective and high-quality service systems. They believe that support services play a key role in enabling people to enjoy their human rights on an equal basis, beyond disability or any other factor. It is precisely this belief that guides EASPD's work in Brussels, Strasbourg and throughout Europe.

Conditions in which the project is implemented



The context of the project is completely new for the teachers, therapists and students involved. It is simultaneously a challenge to do something unfamiliar and an opportunity to create a systematic approach with the purpose of raising awareness of a group of young people around the special needs subject.

The topic of "people with special needs" is often not attractive and popular among the youngsters. In most of the cases, this is due to lack of contact with people with special needs, and consequently lack of understanding of their conditions and needs. Moreover, children's attention is often game-driven and mainly focused on fun.

Society is organised in daily activities that compartmentalise different groups of citizens: while children spend time within schools following (in most of the cases) traditional educational systems that require an age separation in classes, disabled people are often constrained into centres. Urban public spaces are still not designed well enough to allow and encourage inclusion as part of the daily experience. It is possible to recognize a pattern of creation of homogeneous groups, leaving little space for diversity.

Some institutions understand the value of diversity and the challenges entailed in fostering heterogeneous groups. On one hand, it is possible to overcome the comparison among subjects, neutralising the environment and the relations from competition. On the other hand, it is possible to have more space for authenticity, empathy and genuine connections among people.

Unfortunately, the educational environment, where usually young people develop, harbours the creation of homogeneous groups and witnesses strong competition dynamics, as well as disinterest and even condescension towards those who are perceived as different. In such contexts, it is possible to observe a connotation between diversity or vulnerability and weakness, and this might even lead to bullying problems. This process results in intimidating behaviours and/or rejection.

Moreover, the lack of inclusive safe spaces causes harm to the development of a person who sees her self-worth as constantly threatened. This leads to self-judgement and approval-seeking behaviours that provoke adaptation and hyper-productivity.

Interestingly, it is possible to observe a connection between the void caused by the lack of self-connection and the economic framework we live in, characterised by hyper consumption and media entertainment, offering constant incentives to obtain validation.



The project involves Dolphin assisted therapy, Horse assisted therapy and training of a dog to be an assistant, as part of the effort to increase sensitivity towards individuals with special needs. Both therapies and dog training have been shown to have positive effects on physical, emotional, and social well-being, and can provide unique experiences that help young people better understand the challenges faced by individuals with special needs. Despite the novelty of dolphin and horse therapies, and the idea to involve children in dog training, the project aims to establish a systematic approach that can be used to effectively incorporate them into educational and therapeutic settings. By engaging in these therapies, the hope is that students will become more empathetic, compassionate, and knowledgeable about the needs of individuals with special needs.



The realities for the people with disabilities

In Lithuania, there are about 15,000 children with disabilities every year (LR SADM, 2018), and this number remains relatively stable. Among the most common causes of childhood disabilities are mental and behavioural disorders, congenital deformities and chromosomal abnormalities, and nervous system diseases.

While individuals with disabilities in Lithuania do face challenges and barriers in their daily lives, there are also efforts being made to improve their situation. Organisations and initiatives have been established to promote accessibility and inclusion for individuals with disabilities in various aspects of society, such as employment and education. The government has also implemented policies and laws aimed at protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities and ensuring their equal participation in society.

In recent years, there have been advancements in assistive technology and equipment, which can greatly enhance the abilities and independence of individuals with disabilities. Additionally, awareness-raising campaigns and initiatives have been launched to challenge negative attitudes and stereotypes towards individuals with disabilities and promote understanding and acceptance.

Overall, while there is still work to be done, there are positive steps being taken to improve the realities for individuals with disabilities in Lithuania. With continued efforts and support, there is hope for a more inclusive and accessible society for all. Despite the challenges that individuals with disabilities face in Lithuania, there is reason for optimism. The country has made progress in promoting accessibility and inclusion, and there are organisations and initiatives working to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities. With continued efforts and support, there is hope for a future where individuals with disabilities are fully included and their rights are protected. Education and awareness-raising efforts can help challenge negative attitudes and promote understanding and acceptance, leading to a more inclusive and equal society for all.

Bulgaria

People with disabilities continue to face serious discrimination due to a lack of accessibility in public and residential buildings, transportation, athletic, cultural, educational, and recreational facilities, as well as in numerous spheres of life such as education, healthcare, employment, social and other types of services, and access to justice.(Assessment of Bulgarian Helsinki Committee)

In Bulgaria, people and students with special needs face a range of realities that can be challenging to navigate. While there are legal protections in place to ensure equal access and opportunities, the implementation of these policies can vary widely depending on the individual circumstances and resources available.

One of the main obstacles faced by people with special needs in Bulgaria is a lack of adequate support services. This can include everything from accessible transportation and housing to educational accommodations and job training programs. While there are some organisations and government agencies that provide these services, they are often underfunded and understaffed, making it difficult for individuals to access the resources they need.

Another issue is stigma and discrimination. Despite efforts to promote inclusion and diversity, many people with special needs still face negative attitudes and stereotypes from others. This can make it difficult to find employment, socialise with peers, or participate in community activities.

Additionally, there are challenges related to the availability of assistive technology and medical care. Many people with special needs require specialised equipment or treatments to manage their conditions, but these resources may be difficult to obtain or prohibitively expensive. This can limit their ability to live independently and participate fully in society.

Despite these challenges, there are also many individuals and organisations working to improve the realities for people with special needs in Bulgaria. This includes advocacy groups, disability rights organisations, and government agencies that are dedicated to promoting inclusion and equal access to opportunities. With continued efforts and resources, it is possible to create a more supportive and inclusive society for all individuals, regardless of their abilities.

In Belgium, people and students with special needs also face various challenges. The country has implemented legal frameworks and policies to provide support and services to individuals with disabilities. However, there is still a need for improvement in terms of accessibility and inclusion.

People with disabilities in Belgium have the right to access education, employment, and public services. The country has implemented laws such as the Anti-Discrimination Act and the Law on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities to ensure equal opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Schools and universities are required to provide reasonable accommodations for students with disabilities, such as assistive technology and accessible facilities.

Despite these efforts, there are still challenges that people with disabilities face in Belgium. Accessibility remains an issue in public spaces, transportation, and buildings. Many people with disabilities struggle to find employment due to discrimination and lack of accommodations. The cost of assistive technology and medical care can also be a barrier for individuals with disabilities.

In terms of education, there is a need for more specialised support for students with disabilities. While schools are required to provide accommodations, many teachers are not adequately trained to work with students with disabilities. There is a lack of resources and funding for special education programs, which can lead to a lower quality of education for students with disabilities.

Overall, there is a need for continued efforts to improve the realities for people and students with special needs in Belgium. This includes increasing accessibility, providing more specialised support and resources, and addressing discrimination in employment and education. By working towards a more inclusive society, we can ensure that everyone has equal opportunities to succeed.

Meanwhile it was found out that animal therapy organisations are not part of European umbrella organisations such as EASPD and that may be happening for several reasons:

Diverse Focus: Big European organisations often have a broad mandate and diverse areas of focus, such as health, education, environment, and social services. Animal therapy is a specialised field, and it may not align directly with the primary mission of these larger organisations.

Niche Nature: Animal therapy is a relatively niche field compared to other areas of healthcare and therapy. It may not receive the same level of attention and funding as more mainstream healthcare initiatives, which could limit its integration into larger organisations.

Regulatory and Licensing Issues: Animal therapy often involves working with live animals, which may require specific licences, certifications, and compliance with animal welfare regulations. These legal and regulatory considerations can complicate the integration of animal therapy into larger organisations.

Funding Challenges: Animal therapy programs may rely on donations, grants, or other forms of funding. If larger organisations do not see a clear financial benefit or alignment with their mission, they may be hesitant to allocate resources to these programs.

Lack of Awareness: The benefits of animal therapy are not always widely recognized or understood, and there may be a lack of awareness about its potential impact on individuals' well-being. This can make it challenging for animal therapy organisations to gain support from larger, more established organisations.

Organisational Culture: The culture and values of larger organisations may not always align with those of animal therapy organisations. Differences in priorities, philosophies, and approaches to therapy and healthcare can be barriers to integration.

While animal therapy organisations may not always be part of bigger European umbrella organisations, there are instances where collaborations or partnerships can occur. These collaborations can help raise awareness, secure funding, and expand the reach of animal therapy programs. However, it often requires effort from both sides to bridge the gap and find common ground for cooperation.

Goals of the project

The BUSTA project aimed to promote a closer and deeper interaction between students and therapy animals, such as dolphins, horses, and dogs. Through this experience, the students achieved a better understanding of these animals and their impact on people with special needs. Moreover, the project offered an opportunity for the students to actively participate in creating a documentary, from shooting to editing, and travelling to different countries to meet other cultures, and experience firsthand the context specific therapy training achieved by the other partners of the project. The students are not mere recipients in this project but have an active role in the processes. The project's ultimate goal is to provide a unique and enriching experience for the students, which will help them develop 21 century skills and key competences for lifelong learning, and develop a broader perspective on life and a deeper appreciation for the world around them.

Specific Objectives are:

SO1: Empowering teachers to promote students' talents through innovative pedagogy.

The BUSTA Project gave an opportunity to the teachers to promote students' talents through innovative pedagogy. By using methods such as project-based learning, personalised instruction, and collaborative group work, teachers created prerequisites for a learning environment that fosters creativity and encouraged students to explore their interests and talents. Additionally, by providing opportunities for students to showcase their skills and talents through taking part in various activities with the therapy animals, and additional presentations, photo and video shooting and editing, teachers helped students build confidence and gain recognition for their abilities.

SO2: Empowering teachers to promote students' active real-world participation and inclusivity through awareness building and action and psycho-affective connection.

The interaction between teachers and therapists.

Empowering teachers to promote students' active real-world participation and inclusivity is essential for creating a positive and supportive learning environment. One way to achieve this is through awareness building and action. By giving the teachers freedom to work with their students on topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion, they can develop a better understanding of the needs of their students and to support them in the difficulties they encounter and in the questions they ask themselves.

Another important aspect is the psycho-affective connection between teachers and students. By building relationships with their students, teachers can create a safe and supportive environment where students feel valued and respected. This can help to foster a sense of belonging and encourage students to participate more actively in their learning. Overall, empowering teachers to promote active real-world participation and inclusivity requires a multifaceted approach that involves both awareness building and action, as well a focus on building positive relationships with students. By doing so, teachers can help to create a more inclusive and supportive learning environment that benefits all students.

BUSTA project activities are unusual for the students' daily life and the opportunity of various events outside the school walls is a prerequisite for building a new type of relationship between teachers and their students, as well as between the students themselves.

SO3: Empowering students' capacity to develop curiosity, welcome challenges, and co-design creative solutions.

Empowering students' capacity to develop curiosity, welcome challenges, and co-design creative solutions is crucial for their academic and personal growth. During the activities of BUSTA project teachers and therapists who organised the activities with therapy animals helped students to develop these skills by creating a learning environment that encourages exploration, experimentation, and collaboration.

One way to promote curiosity is by changing the setting and providing students with opportunities to ask questions, explore new ideas, and pursue their interests. Teachers and therapists also encouraged students during the activities to take on challenges by providing them with tasks that are just beyond their current level of ability, but still achievable with effort and perseverance. By doing so, teachers and therapists gave a real chance for the students to develop new skills.

Each of the teachers in the partner schools have developed activities in accordance with school rules, methods and according to the needs of the students who took part in the project.

Each of the therapy organisations developed activities that are in accordance with the age group of the students and in full harmony with their own philosophy.

SO4: Empowering students' capacity to use digital tools and content to exchange practices with partner schools, and to create valuable content online for the public.

Empowering students' capacity to use digital tools and content is essential for preparing them for the modern world.

One way to promote the use of digital tools is by integrating technology into the project activities and providing students with access to a range of digital resources. This includes multimedia tools such as video editing software and graphic design tools. During the project activities the students were motivated to participate by shooting with a camera or smartphone.

To exchange practices with partner schools, teachers facilitated video exchange between the students. This provided students with the opportunity to learn from their peers in other countries and develop a global perspective.

On the following pages, you will find detailed accounts of how the organisations have diligently worked towards achieving each of the specific objectives.

Participants

Students and young people

Providing students with alternative activities to the national curriculum can greatly enhance their educational experience. Even if the students are not directly involved in the offered activities, they have the opportunity to touch and experience the new through their peers.

The discovery of previously unknown topics is in itself a prerequisite for learning and enrichment.

Moreover, by providing the opportunity for the students to be in an environment where they are not just at the receiving end of the knowledge transmission chain, but rather they are active actors in the creation of the activities, empowers and strengthens their abilities and allows them to contribute to the implementation phase.

“The animal is a conduit for learning to be human: some propose that it is only through the animal that we recognise our humanity” – Jane Bone (2013)
Through the project students had the opportunity to interact with animals on a different level and in conditions that are not common in their daily life even if they and their families own pets. They had the opportunity to see animals as partners for a bigger goal. Approaching animals also improves their confidence, their leadership and communication skills. Young people find themselves worthy of ideas and abilities with the help of an animal. They begin to understand they can make an impact through that partnership. On the other hand, it helps them feel their emotions, work on their confidence and find their strengths.

Another important need of young people that the BUSTA project enables to be met is travelling to other countries and meeting new people in order to broaden their perspective. By experiencing different cultures, customs, and traditions, they can gain a better understanding of the world around them. This exposure can lead to personal growth, increased empathy, and a more open-minded approach to life.

Travelling to other countries can also help young people develop important life skills such as adaptability, problem-solving, and communication. They will encounter situations that challenge their comfort zones and force them to think outside the box. These experiences can be invaluable in shaping their character and preparing them for future endeavours.

Furthermore, meeting new people from different backgrounds can help young people develop a sense of global citizenship.

Teachers

The BUSTA project provides access to opportunities beyond the traditional school program's framework to both teachers and school staff. Flexible school activities play a crucial role in the professional development of teachers. These activities provide a platform for educators to explore new educational approaches, develop their own life-long learning skills, and foster cooperation with their students. By engaging in flexible school activities, teachers are able to expand their knowledge base and enhance their teaching skills. This, in turn, creates a positive impact on the learning outcomes of their students.

Moreover, flexible school activities provide teachers with the opportunity to experiment with new teaching techniques and strategies. This allows for a more personalised approach to education, catering to the unique needs of each student. By collaborating with other educators and sharing their experiences, teachers can continuously improve their teaching methods and stay up-to-date with the latest trends in education. They not only enhance the quality of education but also promote a culture of innovation and collaboration within the schools.

What were the positives for the Sea museum, PQHFB, Dyadis?

The Dolphin assisted therapy department of the Lithuania Sea museum involved in the BUSTA project has experienced several positives because of their participation. Here are some key points:

The BUSTA project offered an interesting opportunity for professionals from the Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT) department to transition into the role of teachers. By becoming educators in the project, the professional therapists could share their expertise and knowledge in a different context, adapting their therapeutic techniques to educational settings. This transition allowed them to explore new ways of supporting students' learning and development, leveraging their experience as therapists to enhance the educational experience of the students involved in the project.

Cooperative learning and building connections: The project focused on promoting cooperation among students and building connections. This led to the development of courage and various creative, cognitive, and social competences. The students learned to work together in groups, listen to others' opinions, adapt to their peers' capabilities, and work towards shared goals.

Development of empathy and tolerance: The project contributed to the students' increased tolerance, calmness, and positive responses towards people with disabilities, including a classmate with autism spectrum disorder. By experiencing the world of individuals with disabilities and understanding their challenges, the students developed empathy and a greater appreciation for inclusion in society.

Conflict resolution skills and emotional resilience: The students acquired conflict resolution skills and became more capable of dealing with emotional difficulties independently. Through their involvement in the project, they learned how to manage conflicts, express themselves effectively, and navigate emotional challenges.

Organisational challenges: The project presented some organisational challenges, such as arranging meetings with partners at the Dolphin Therapy Center and coordinating field trips. These challenges required adjustments to the regular class schedule, transportation arrangements, and parental communication. Overcoming these challenges demonstrated the commitment of the teachers and the willingness of the students to participate in the project.

Workshops and awareness-building activities: The Lithuania Sea Museum conducted workshops in collaboration with the Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT) team and schoolteachers. These workshops engaged students in various activities related to dolphins, animal behaviour, and recreating their parents' childhood games. The workshops aimed to increase curiosity, independent research, observation skills, and effective communication among students.

Promotion of inclusivity and empathy: The teachers took initiatives to promote inclusivity and empathy among the students by organising parallel activities focused on raising awareness towards people with special needs. These activities included educational theatre performances, film screenings, discussions on disabilities, and celebrating World Down Syndrome Day. These efforts aimed to foster understanding, respect, and compassion towards individuals with disabilities.

These positives demonstrate the impact of the BUSTA project on the Lithuania Sea Museum and the students involved, enhancing their social and emotional skills, promoting empathy, and encouraging inclusive attitudes. Also we are immensely proud to have created and registered a non-formal education program (lithuanian I. NVŠ Krepšelis), initiative inspired by the impactful activities of the Busta project by infusing the program with elements of marine life, such as dolphins, dolphin-assisted therapy, seals, and other captivating creatures, we have crafted an innovative and engaging educational experience. Our program nurtures holistic development, encourages environmental consciousness, and equips children with essential skills for the future.

The “NVŠ Krepšelis” program is supported by funding from the national budget of the Republic of Lithuania and financial assistance from the European Union. This financial support is allocated to municipalities to expand non-formal education programs and increase the number of children benefiting from non-formal education programs.

“NVŠ Krepšelis” has become a shining example of how non-formal education can transcend the traditional confines of a classroom, igniting a sense of wonder, exploration, and curiosity within young minds. By introducing children to the wonders of marine life and providing them with hands-on experiences, the program cultivates a profound connection with nature, instilling in them a sense of environmental stewardship that will shape their perspectives for years to come.

Moreover, the program's emphasis on STEAM education within a non-formal setting positions children for success in the future. By integrating science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics with the world of marine life, NVŠ Krepšelis equips students with the skills and knowledge needed to thrive in an ever-evolving global landscape. It fosters critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving abilities, empowering children to become adaptable and innovative thinkers prepared for the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead.

Paint and Quarter

Horse Foundation

Bulgaria /PQHFB/

The BUSTA project had multiple benefits for Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation Bulgaria as an organisation, for its horse trainers and therapists, for its volunteers, for the therapy horses, and for the Programs of the organisation.

The project brought to the organisation the input of young students. Their insights and new creative ideas were an inspiration for the trainers of the therapy horses at PQHFB. It improved the skills and competence of the trainers, challenging them to incorporate the participation of the CDE students in the training of the horses. The process called for creativity in the trainers and out of the box thinking. The horses experienced group training that is otherwise rarely possible, bringing them the ability to adapt to the new environment under the guidance of the trainers. The impact on the therapy animals is one of the key benefits from the BUSTA project that will have a long term effect on the people with disabilities our organisation works with.

During the BUSTA project a child with special needs from the PQHFB Program Free Therapeutic Riding for Children with disabilities participated in the activities with the CDE students. That was a great opportunity for the child not only to receive the therapeutic riding session but to socialise with the students. The child felt welcomed and part of the group. That brought a direct benefit to the child connecting the BUSTA project with the Program.

In addition, the Program benefited as a whole through the practices developed with the students during the project.

The young volunteers of PQHFB voluntarily participated in the organisation and the activities with the CDE students. The young people were part of another project of PQHFB – Young People and Horses Make a Change for Children with Disabilities, funded by the European Solidarity Corps Program. The young people were impressed by the BUSTA project and with great enthusiasm made documentary movies of each of the students' visits. They were able to see how meaningful an international cooperation can be and what some of the opportunities offered by EU programs such as Erasmus+ are. On an organisational level PQHFB managed to establish strong and long term cross sector connections with the partners of the BUSTA project. Those partnerships with some of the organisations will extend to other projects. The most recent one is the project Youth Going Back to Nature – Engage, Connect, Empower, also supported by the Erasmus+ Program.

Dyadis, Belgium

Unlike the other animal therapy organisations involved in the BUSTA project, Dyadis was not an official partner, but an associate partner: this means the organisation signed an agreement to be loosely associated with the project, without financial links nor obligations to the activities nor the project results.

Nonetheless, Dyadis reported multiple benefits from the BUSTA project of different levels:

- Dyadis had the opportunity to imagine how new possibilities of working with a school could enrich the training process of the therapy dog. This took place during an exploration visit to the school during the design phase of the project and brainstorm session.
- Dyadis takes into consideration the unique personality of each dog before determining their future work life. Some dogs that are more social and have less endurance with focused effort will be selected for work with multiple beneficiaries within an elderly home for example. With the BUSTA project, Dyadis was able to select such a dog, in order to explore activities that would contribute to more fulfilment in her future work life.

- To help the Dyadis trainers, volunteer host families are selected to host and train the dogs for the first 18 months of their lives. The host of the dog selected for the BUSTA project was a physiotherapy student wishing to specialise in animal therapy. Thanks to the BUSTA project, as our Dyadis representative, she received the following benefits: she was able to transmit her knowledge to the BOS students in Brussels; learn about democratic education; to volunteer at BOS; to travel to Sofia, Bulgaria; to practise her English skills; to talk about dog assistance and disabilities to the students of the CDE school in Sofia; to visit the PQHFB ranch and learn from the CDE students how to interact with the horses; got very close to the visiting dolphin trainers. This person is an active organising member of the Belgian Scouts, where the Dyadis dog in training is regularly participating. The BUSTA project acted as a catalyst for possible future partnerships and cross sectorial projects, by attracting attention from the scouts into the involvement of the dog into an international project.
- A BOS Student integrated scouts thanks to the close ties to the Dyadis appointed host family person, created through the BUSTA activities and travels.
- Dyadis got visibility, through the BUSTA dissemination posts and activities, appeared in the BUSTA documentary (through interviews, their training sessions, and their new training facilities) with international visibility. The students and their families purchased and read their published book.
- The students and their families purchased and read their published book.
- Dyadis will receive international visitors and organise an activity during LTT3.
- Previously, Dyadis benefited from local donations and support. Through the project, Dyadis got the attention of EASPD, which could potentially link them to receiving support from the EU.

Timeline and progress of the conducted activities

Bulgaria - Community for Democratic education and Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation

At a democratic/self-directed school the philosophy dictates that students have the freedom to choose which activities they wish to participate in. However, in order to make an informed decision, students require detailed information about the purpose, expectations, duration, frequency, and most importantly, their personal interest in the activity. To facilitate this process, informal conversations were held with various student groups to familiarise them with the project, its topics, and planned activities. While some students initially expressed interest, they later withdrew due to the necessary commitment involved. The process involved approximately 25 students aged between 10 and 13 years old. Despite this setback, a group of 9 students displayed determination and curiosity for the proposed activities and decided to participate in the project. This approach ensures that students have autonomy over their learning experience while also encouraging them to take responsibility for their choices.

In order to introduce the topics of the project, a questionnaire was conducted as the first step. The main objective of the questionnaire was twofold. Firstly, it aimed to direct the students' attention towards the topics of the project by posing relevant questions. Secondly, it aimed to open up a discussion about unfamiliar topics and concepts that may arise during the course of the project. By doing so, it is hoped that students will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the project's objectives and develop a more comprehensive approach towards its completion. The questionnaire served as a starting point for further discussions and provided a foundation upon which the project can be built. It is anticipated that this approach will lead to a more engaged and informed group of students who are better equipped to tackle the challenges that lie ahead.

As per the project timeline, it was scheduled for the students to visit PQHF ranch five times. Each subsequent visit was designed to enhance their knowledge and skills. The visits were planned in a sequential manner, with each one building upon the previous one. The objective of the horse assisted therapy program was to equip students with a thorough comprehension of the therapy's significance in improving individuals' well-being. The training of horses and the structure of therapy sessions were also emphasised in the program. The program was designed to educate students on the importance of horse training, as it is a crucial aspect of the therapy process. The therapy sessions' meaning and structure were also explored, providing students with an understanding of how to conduct sessions that help individuals improve their physical, emotional, and mental health.



Important part of each visit was that the students were given ample time to interact closely with the horses. They engaged in activities such as leading them from the pasture and then brushing them for a while. This moment was crucial for the students as it allowed them to relax, connect with the horses, and understand the impact of close contact with these animals on human beings. The experience not only provided a real therapeutic effect that could be easily observed, but it also helped the students develop a deeper appreciation for these majestic creatures. Through this interaction, they learned to understand the importance of empathy and communication in building relationships with animals.

During the first and second sessions at the ranch, the primary objective was to familiarise participants with the horses and facilities. The sessions also aimed to introduce therapeutic activities that can be assisted by horses and to provide an overview of different special needs. Participants were given the opportunity to experience close contact with a horse and learn how to lead them. Additionally, they observed a therapeutic riding session and engaged in brainstorming games to play during therapy sessions. As part of the experience, participants were able to sit on the back of a horse and try some of the games. All of these activities aimed to open up students' curiosity. By the end of the sessions, participants had gained understanding of how horses can be involved in therapy and were more brave to have a closer contact with them.



During the third visit to the ranch, the students actively participated in a therapy session with a child who has special needs. They assisted with familiar games and tested out new ones they had brainstormed and tried out previous time. Additionally, they spent quality time with the child outside of the therapy session, engaging in play and sharing lunch together. The visit also included a discussion about the various needs associated with different disabilities. This experience provided the students with a unique opportunity to gain firsthand knowledge and understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with special needs. It allowed them to develop empathy and compassion while also learning practical skills for working with individuals who require additional support. Overall, this visit was a valuable learning experience for the students, and they left with a greater appreciation for the importance of inclusivity and accessibility.

During the 4th visit of students to the ranch, the focus was on training therapy horses. The day started with observing the herd of horses and bringing a trained one and another one who is in a training stage from the pasture to the arena.

The students learned about how training is developed in accordance with the condition of a particular horse. They also understood the goals and purposes of training therapy horses, which is to make a connection with different disabilities. It is important to understand the needs of each horse and tailor the training accordingly. This helps to ensure that the horse is comfortable and can perform at its best.



The students experienced that training therapy horses is a challenging task, but it is also rewarding. They learned about the importance of empathy and patience when working with therapy horses. Overall, it was an enriching experience that helped the students develop new skills and deepen their understanding of horse assisted therapy.

The other goal of the visit was preparation for the upcoming Learning, Teaching and Training Activity. (more at section Learning, Teaching, Training)

During the last visit of students to the ranch the focus was on advanced training techniques, followed by a discussion and reflection on the entire experience. One interesting point of discussion was the parallels between the democratic model of education and PQHF's methodology of training horses. Both emphasise the importance of individualised attention and respect for each student or animal's unique needs and abilities. Overall, the experience provided valuable insights into the world of horse assisted therapy and the importance of a personalised approach to education and training. One of the students concluded that the ranch of Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation is like a democratic school, but for horses.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the lives and unique circumstances of individuals with special needs, students engaged in parallel activities. These activities included watching short documentaries and participating in follow-up discussions to explore different conditions. By taking this approach, students were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by those with special needs, as well as the ways in which society can better support them. Through these activities, students were able to develop empathy and a greater appreciation for diversity, which are crucial skills for any individual working in fields related to education or social services. Overall, these activities provided a valuable opportunity for students to broaden their perspectives and deepen their understanding of the world around them.

The students had the opportunity to participate in a unique and important event during their educational journey. They visited a dark restaurant where customers eat in complete darkness, and the waitresses are blind. This experience gave the students a better perspective on how people with vision disorders live their daily lives. For a couple of hours, the students experienced what it is like to eat without being able to see their food, which was an eye-opening experience for them. During the visit, the students had the chance to ask questions related to the lives, work, and hobbies of the two blind ladies who served them. This interaction was an excellent opportunity for the students to learn more about the challenges that people with vision disorders face and how they overcome them.

The students were invited to visit a sports hall for people with vision disorders. This was also an excellent opportunity for them to learn more about adaptive sports and how they can be used to promote physical activity and social inclusion for people with disabilities. Overall, this event was an important learning experience for the students, and it gave them a better understanding of the challenges faced by people with vision disorders. It also highlighted the importance of promoting inclusion and accessibility in all areas of life.

As part of a program aimed at promoting deeper understanding and empathy towards people with special needs, some of the students and their teacher attended a basketball on wheels match during the Balkan tournament in Sofia, Bulgaria. This parallel activity provided an opportunity for the students to witness and gain a better understanding of adapted sports. By watching the match, they were able to observe the unique challenges faced by athletes with disabilities and gain insight into the adaptations made to sports equipment and rules to accommodate them. Attending this event allowed students to experience first-hand the determination and perseverance of these athletes, as well as the importance of inclusivity and equal opportunities in sports. This experience not only broadened the students' perspectives but also fostered a greater appreciation for the abilities and strengths of individuals with special needs.





At the school, an activity was organised to raise awareness about people with special needs. A blind man and his guide dog were invited to visit the school, which proved to be an interesting experience for the students. Some of them had the opportunity to play with the dog in the school yard while the guest explored the premises with a teacher and other students. During the visit, the guest shared his passion for outdoor activities such as long-distance marathons, hiking, caving, skiing, climbing, and more. He also spoke about how he overcomes the barriers he faces as a person with special needs. Additionally, he shared important rules with the students on how to interact with blind people and their guide dogs when encountering them on the street. These rules included not touching the dog, asking if the person needs help, and properly leading them if assistance is required.

The visit was a valuable experience for the students as it helped to increase their understanding and empathy towards people with special needs. It also provided them with practical knowledge on how to interact with blind people and their guide dogs in a respectful and helpful manner.

During the students' visits to the ranch, they were engaged in video and photo shooting activities. This provided them with an excellent opportunity to develop their digital competences. Furthermore, they were also involved in the post-production of the material. One of the students even curated her own exhibition at the school, showcasing the photos she had taken during the ranch visit. Another student edited a two-minute video that each organisation had to prepare for LTT2, which took place in Klaipeda, Lithuania. Overall, these activities helped the students to enhance their skills in digital media production and editing. The students' participation in these activities is a testament to their willingness to learn and explore new avenues of knowledge.



Lithuania - Lithuanian Sea Museum and Klaipeda Montessori school

The goal of the BUSTA project is not only to include the experience of an animal therapy centre and animal training in school life. Most of the attention was paid to cooperation among students, building connections, development of courage, development of various creative, cognitive and social competences. The development of ideas of democracy, the activism of the project served the students' understanding of how people with disabilities experience the world, what challenges they face, and how we can support their inclusion in society. This experience is also useful for strengthening the class team. The students used the benefits of group work more and more boldly and productively each time, tried to listen to the opinions of others, adapt to their friends' capabilities and more responsibly achieve the group's goals.

The teacher had noticed that students have become more tolerant, calm and respond more positively to people with disabilities, to a classmate with autism spectrum disorder. Students have acquired conflict resolution skills and are able to deal with emotional difficulties more independently. The project posed a number of organisational challenges. 7 meetings with partners, mostly at the Dolphin Therapy Center, required correction of daily educational activities. The teachers had to condense the topics of the program, to conduct some lessons in the centre, and to integrate them with other project activities. The teacher had to devote a lot of time to preparing field trip programs, informing parents, and preparing consents. The distance to the centre is about 10 km. It had to be covered by three different means of transport – a privately hired bus, a ferry and a bus provided by the centre.

The entire duration of the excursion is about 4 hours. The usual class schedule had to be changed, another meal time (lunch in the canteen) had to be combined. Such changes did not sit well with the boy, who has an autism spectrum disorder, part of the class. He took part in only one trip to the centre.

The workshops for schools is an awareness-building activity that aims to provide students with a multifaceted approach to learning about dolphins, while developing key competencies such as literacy, science, digital skills, learning, and entrepreneurship. The activity involves a series of tasks and activities related to dolphins and is carried out by the Dolphin Assisted Therapy (DAT) team in collaboration with school teachers.

The methodology of the activity involves various steps that aim to increase students' curiosity and willingness for independent research. In the first workshop, students were required to conduct research on different dolphin species to gain a better understanding of these creatures. They also engaged in physical activities that were based on dolphin movement patterns and worked in small groups to collaborate and communicate effectively.



In the second workshop, students prepared questions for a dolphin trainer, a friend from a partner school abroad, and a dolphin itself. An animal behaviour specialist provided education about dolphin's behaviours, and students engaged in active games to increase their ability to observe, listen, and assimilate information. They also worked in groups to create toys for dolphins based on the information gathered throughout the day, which required resourcefulness.



In the third workshop, students were required to prepare a brief story about their parents' childhood games before the workshop. In student groups, they shared their stories about their parents' childhood games and provided feedback on unknown games. A specialist from the Sea Museum provided guidance on the behaviour and games of fish, and students worked in groups to recreate their parents' childhood games, which were filmed for a documentary.



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In the fourth workshop, specialists from the Dolphin Assisted Therapy Center visited the Marija Montessori School in Klaipeda to introduce and familiarise children with dolphin-assisted therapy and its benefits for children with special needs. Students shared their summer vacation experiences related to new animal interactions, and specialists explained the process of dolphin-assisted therapy, activities carried out, goals, social contact, and the importance of this therapy for both animals and humans. A video report was shown at the end of the meeting to reinforce the knowledge gained by the children.





Fifth - the class was divided in small groups for better interaction with the dolphins; training games.

The teachers took it upon themselves to promote inclusivity and empathy among their students by organising parallel activities that focused on raising awareness towards people with special needs. These activities were designed to encourage students to understand and appreciate the unique challenges faced by individuals with disabilities, and to foster a sense of compassion and respect for those who are differently-abled.

Such activity as the educational theatre performance "Dantenija" is a powerful example of the necessary integration of people with special needs. The professional actors, along with actors with special needs, deliver a moving performance that highlights the importance of accepting each other. Prior to the performance, spectators are educated on the importance of inclusion and understanding.

After viewing Joshua Weigel's film "The Butterfly Circus," students engage in a thoughtful discussion about individuals with disabilities. The film serves as a catalyst for exploring the issues of bullying and exclusion faced by those with disabilities. The students shared their opinions and insights, expressing empathy for those who have experienced discrimination. Through this conversation, they gain a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by individuals with disabilities and the importance of creating an inclusive society. The students recognize the need to promote awareness and advocate for the rights of those with disabilities.



In a recent theoretical-practical session, fourth-grade students were educated on what Down syndrome is and how it affects individuals. Through various activities, the students experienced firsthand some of the challenges that people with Down syndrome face on a daily basis. After completing the activities, the students were given the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings on their experiences. This exercise was designed to promote empathy and understanding among the students, and to help them develop a greater appreciation for diversity and inclusivity. By learning about Down syndrome and engaging in activities that simulate some of the challenges faced by those with the condition, the students gained a deeper understanding of the importance of respect and compassion towards individuals with disabilities.

At school, students celebrated World Down Syndrome Day in a unique way. On March 21st, all students wore odd socks to commemorate the day. During their art lessons, students were shown short educational videos that were specially created for Lithuanian students about Down syndrome. The videos were aimed at raising awareness about the condition and helping students understand it better. Additionally, students drew socks and decorated them in their own unique ways. All the drawn socks were then used to decorate the school boards, creating a colourful and vibrant display. This celebration was a great way to promote inclusion and acceptance of people with Down syndrome in the school community.

Belgium

Brussels Outdoor School, EASPD, associated partner Dyadis

Dog training organisations offer a unique opportunity for civilian families to volunteer as host families for the first year or 18 months of a dog's life. The goals of these organisations vary from basic toilet training and socialisation to more advanced tasks such as desensitisation to public spaces and learning basic commands. One of the main objectives of these organisations is to prepare dogs for their future role as assistant animals. This involves exposing them to a range of different environments and situations, such as busy markets, shops, car rides, and public transportation. Through this process, dogs learn to remain calm and focused in potentially stressful situations. In addition to this, they are taught basic commands that will be essential for their future work as therapy animals. Overall, dog therapy organisations play a vital role in preparing dogs for their important work, and the families who volunteer as host families are making a valuable contribution to their communities.

The structural specificities of the Brussels Outdoor School have been taken into account in designing the activities: the context allowed space for freedom and spontaneous changes. Most key competencies and all 21st century skills were activated during the organic unfolding of the activities. This represents a positive indicator of the impact of reproducibility and the possibilities for teachers operating in other school frameworks to reproduce and adapt this experience in their context.

The impact does not rely on the exact reproduction of the activities but rather on setting achievable goals with the dog. Here is a list of a framework specificity at the Brussels Outdoor School, that might differ in other schools and require changes in the design of the activity in order to fit other contexts:

No age separation. As a democratic school, all students ranging from age 3 to 12 are sharing the spaces and can interact or not at anytime;

The school is small, so most of the indoor space communicates with each other. Even though kids chose not to participate in an activity, they had visual access to it, and they could see the activities unfold.

Even though the kids could choose when they would be inside or outside, most kids spent their time outside in a large shared space and also in the forest. The dog and the host family trainer would move around with the dog, visiting different groups of kids. During training games, other kids had visual access to the activities.

When the dog was in the host family, there were playdates where other students came to visit. The dog would be without a leash indoors. Other times when other kids were not visiting, much filming was done for the others to have access later to the footage.

Most of the neighbourhood connections happened in a dog park close by, where the dog could be outdoors without the leash and could freely interact with neighbours and their dogs. Many neighbours became curious about the dogs training process and future job, and the students got to talk to others about how the dog would benefit a disabled person and how they are contributing to train the dog for that purpose.

For the BUSTA project, Dyadis organisation gave us the opportunity to have activities with a dog in training that had already reached one year of age. In the case this experience would be repeated elsewhere, the dog could be integrated regularly in the school at much younger ages, anywhere from puppy until 18 months of age. We observed some kids having to learn to assert their boundaries to prevent the dog from jumping on them. This was part of the overcoming of fear.

We have data collected from our member democratic school L'Arbre des Possibles that this process is reciprocal. In the case of dog puppies, through attentive leadership of teachers and trainers, kids learn how to not invade and intrude the dog's spatial boundaries. The children learned an important lesson on self-control in order to respect the needs and spaces of the dog. This process of creating a balance would establish itself by time and through interactive experiences between dogs and children.

During the phase where the BUSTA project involves the students in, there are rules to follow and behaviours not to encourage in the dog in order to limit distractibility or unpredictable behaviour in the dog later on. The next phases of the dogs training are implemented by specialised trainers, full time, within training centres.

The training process for therapy dogs offers a multitude of skill development opportunities for students. Unlike other therapy animals, dogs can easily be integrated into daily school activities and the home-life of the temporary hosting family. This integration has a significant impact on interpersonal dynamics within various social spaces, including school, home, family, and neighbourhood.

Through training therapy dogs in different locations, students benefit from exploring new environments and developing their focus and attention. This process has a therapeutic and neuroregulatory effect on students. Conversely, training therapy animals in familiar environments, such as at school or at home, can have an impact on the environment itself.

Overall, the training process for therapy dogs has proven to be a valuable tool for student development and has the potential to positively impact various social spaces. As such, it is important to continue exploring the benefits of assistant dog training and its impact on student well-being.

Another specialty of the therapy dog training regards the duration and range of interaction between students and the dog, that must allow freedom and autonomy on behalf of the students. These interactions can be of the following nature: intentional training game practice, intentional experimentation of new training games, interactions to care for the dogs needs (feeding, walking, toilet training), interaction to establish boundaries, affection interaction with no intention of producing a result, being together without interacting together (sharing space), interacting and navigating with the outside world, as a team with the dog

One more context specific thing worth reflecting upon is how much contact is potentially possible between those in the animal training role (the students) and the beneficiaries of this therapy animal assistance.

In the Belgian partnership, the students would be in close contact with the dog, and occasionally the dog's professional and civilian trainers, but rarely with the persons with special needs.

Training on wheelchairs was carried out by experts in order to educate the dog in the host family care. Therefore, learning about the special needs of the persons with disabilities was achieved through understanding the purpose of the students' role in the training.

Dyadis, the dog therapy association, encourages contact between the dog's hosting families and the future beneficiaries' family, because of the long term impact and benefit this initiative offers. However, the process of pairing a dog with a beneficiary can take time and is subject to last minute setbacks (e.s failing a qualifying test).



It is worth mentioning the story of the Belgian Politician, who regularly trains dogs, that through social media found and managed to get in touch with the mother of the 16 years old autistic beneficiary of one of the dogs she had trained. This encounter enabled the creation of a book reporting the experience of the mother, who for the first time in 16 years managed to gradually assure more autonomy to her child and observed the development of his skills.

Thanks to this, they published a book which was part of the BUSTA activities. It was very precious as it helped our students realise how the therapy dog could drastically help the beneficiary, but also give a normal life back to the care taking family.

In the book, the mother describes how for the first time in 16 years she could sleep in a different room than her son, because the dog would prevent the kid from waking up in the middle of the night and physically attack himself, or how they now do simple tasks like making it to the checkout line of a supermarket or spending the whole day in school without having to interrupt things because of severe crisis, along with the child enjoying for the first time physical proximity and affection, and developing the desire to care for it and feed it.

The BUSTA project activities began with a formal representation of the project to the students and what are the opportunities they have if they decide to take part in it. All kids, who were 7 years and above, were asked to attend the presentation of the project in order to choose whether to participate in the next steps. A group of students created a video message to begin an exchange with the Bulgarian students. While some students decided to not take part in the project, they still assisted in filming the video out of curiosity. These individuals requested to have their faces blurred in the final product. It's important to note that each student made an independent decision on whether or not to participate. This highlights the students' autonomy and the value placed on individual decision-making. The video message was a first step in initiating the communication between the students from BOS and CDE.



Two visits of the dog in training and its trainer followed up at the school. The first visit was an introductory meeting where the trainer familiarised the dog with the new environment and the children. The second visit was more interactive as the dog participated in the weekly democratic meeting circles among students. The host family member demonstrated a few training exercises, explained their purposes, and gave the children an opportunity to try them out. The purpose of these exercises was to train the dog and to show the children how to train the dog.

The next step in the process involved hosting a dog in training at the home of one of the BOS families for a period of two weeks. The dog, named Aika, was provided with food and all necessary tools upon arrival at the hosting house. The hosting family was given a detailed explanation and instructions on how to care for the dog during its stay. This phase was crucial for both the dog and the family to get to know each other and establish mutual trust. The initial days were spent in practical adjustments, as the dog and the family needed time to get acquainted with each other's presence. It was a time for overcoming resistance and fear, setting boundaries, and establishing leadership. The dog constantly challenged the students' boundaries, which required them to practise disinhibiting themselves and using commands such as "No" and "sit." They adjusted their body posture until they were no longer scared and felt in total control of their personal space.

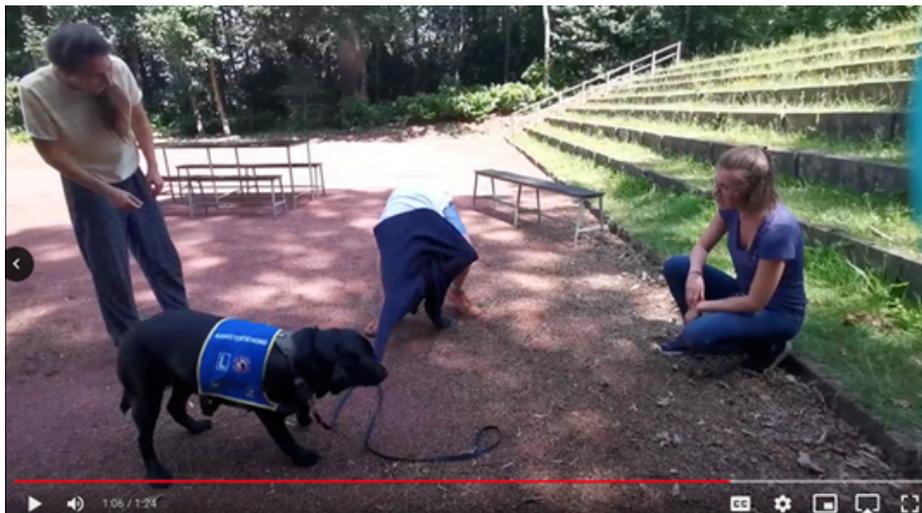
During visits to the dog park, there appears to be a strong emotional connection between humans and dogs. This was observed after students studied dog commands and began interacting with the dogs. Specifically, students engaged in an exploration of interaction with a dog named Aika. They designed games and reflected on how they could assist Aika in reaching the next level of training. This type of interaction is not only beneficial for the dog's development but also for the students' understanding of animal behaviour and training techniques. By observing and engaging with dogs in a controlled environment, students can develop a deeper appreciation for the animal-human bond.

During the dog training, the students demonstrated their problem-solving skills by creating new strategies to overcome limitations. However, it was crucial for them to remain consistent with the training methodology and be aware of their impact. The students also shared their discoveries with each other, and all activities unfolded spontaneously, including practising training games in the park. As part of the host family tasks, desensitising the dog to distracting situations and noises was achieved through the use of a vacuum cleaner after a day in the park. Interestingly, students who initially feared and had an aversion towards dogs expressed their newfound desire to hug the dog. They sought help to develop courage and disinhibition to engage with the dog and show affection and healthy authority.

The training and integration of training games for students with dogs has shown positive outcomes. Initially, some students displayed fear but eventually developed confidence in working and interacting with the dogs. Activities such as having the dog pull off a sock and placing it in one's hand, walking the dog in public spaces, and using public transport presented new challenges for the students. These challenges brought out their proactivity, pride, and trust towards the dog and the people who attempted to interact with it. Additionally, the students and the dog created links with the community during their walks in the park and public spaces. The moment of the dog's departure empowered a moment of collective reflection and self-awareness. The lasting effects of this program have shown an increase in self-worth among the students.



Strengthening the bonds within a community is essential in achieving our educational objectives. Afterwards we organised two dog-sitting evenings for Aika, and a friend of one of our students visited our school then. Additionally, we held a dressage class with Dyadis, and the students had the opportunity to witness and film the training activities. This provided them with a deeper understanding of the scientific and biological aspects of how dogs react to their environment. Another activity we conducted was watching a docu-series called "Pick of the Litter." This allowed us to explore the unique characteristics of guide dogs that assist the blind. By engaging in these activities, our students were able to strengthen their connection with each other and with the community as a whole. These experiences helped us inculcate the values of empathy, compassion, and responsibility in our students, which are essential for their personal growth and development.



Learning, teaching, training activities

The first of the three planned Learning, Teaching, Training meetings took place in Sofia, Bulgaria in the beginning of October 2022. The aim of this meeting was the exchange of practices and skills acquired within the framework of the BUSTA project. The participation was open to teachers and therapists involved in the project as well as students interested in therapeutic animals from their schools.



The program of the event was designed jointly by the two Bulgarian hosts: Association Community for Democratic Education and Paint Quarter Horse Foundation.

The total of the participants was 7: from Bos Democratic School in Belgium: 1 teacher, 1 student, 1 dog trainer;
from Montessori school in Lithuania: two teachers
from Lithuanian Sea Museum: two trainers and therapists working with dolphins.

They had the opportunity to spend two days in a row at the ranch of the "Paint & Quarter Horse" Foundation, to get to know the horses and the benefits of therapy riding. Moreover, all guests and students from the CDE, participated in the training session of a future therapy horse.



Students from the hosting Democratic school had the occasion to share insights and knowledge from their experiences of visiting the ranch during the period June to September.



The program of the event included two days visiting the Democratic School in Sofia. Partners from Lithuania and Belgium had the opportunity to get to know more about the values of democratic education and self-directed learning as well as to see and experience their application in practice. This time represented a spontaneous moment for the CDE's students to communicate freely with their guests and fellow student from the BOS school.

The BOS student shared her experience in training a dog to become an assistant to a disabled person.

The dolphin therapists from Lithuania designed a dynamic and impressive experience for all the students of the CDE in which they deepened their understanding of dolphins and their role in therapy.



The second Learning Teaching Training meeting was held in Klaipeda, Lithuania, in late November 2022, with participation from eight students from Bulgaria and six students from Belgium. Hosted by the Sea Museum and the Montessori school. The program included a range of activities aimed at fostering cultural exchange and learning opportunities for the students.



Over the course of two days, the students and their teachers engaged in a variety of activities at the Montessori school, including learning about Lithuanian traditions, cultural exchange, playing games together, and attending an activity focused on the specifics of Dawn syndrome. This provided a valuable opportunity for the students to learn about different cultures and traditions, while also fostering greater understanding and appreciation among them.



Another important aspect of the program was familiarisation with the work of physiotherapists at the dolphinarium of Dolphin assisted therapy centre. The students were able to have close contact and interaction with the dolphins, gaining a deeper understanding of how these intelligent creatures can be used to assist in therapy and rehabilitation.



Finally, the students attended the Lithuanian Sea Museum Festival, an annual event held at Klaipeda University that aims to familiarise students with the specifics of different special needs through interactive activities and games. This provided a fun and engaging way for the students to learn more about special needs and how they can be addressed in a positive and inclusive manner.





Third and last Learning, teaching, training meeting was hosted by QUEST in Brussels, at the end September 2023. Ten participants - seven students and three staff members from the Community for Democratic Education of Sofia stayed at QUEST's headquarters, a typical Belgian townhouse near the European institutions. The other participants were the Paint and Quarter Horse Foundation team from Bulgaria, staff from the Maria Montessori School of Klaipeda, and dolphin trainers from the Lithuanian Sea Museum.

On the first day of the LTT, Dyadis, our associate partner for Assistance Dog training, welcomed all the participants and provided an overview of the long process involved in training a dog to be a service animal. The trainers also introduced the dogs who were at the end of their training, allowing the participants to observe their skills and behaviour. Spending and some free time with the dogs proved to be a delightful experience for all the attendees, and it also benefited the animals as they require playtime to relax in between their intensive training sessions at the centre.



The meeting also provided an opportunity for trainers from different disciplines, such as dolphin and horse trainers, to engage in deep conversations with the dog trainers. This allowed them to compare similarities and differences in their work, something that is rarely possible under normal circumstances.



QUEST had made arrangements for a casual dinner, allowing the attendees to engage in relaxed and informal communication. This provided an opportunity for the participants to bond and network in a more relaxed setting. The social dinner was a great way to promote camaraderie and build relationships among the participants, fostering a sense of community and collaboration. The relaxed atmosphere allowed for open and honest conversations, which helped to break down any barriers that may have existed.

On the second day, the participants had the opportunity to visit an inclusive pedagogical farm that was established approximately four decades ago by Neli Philipson. Philipson was a teacher at a school for children with special needs and was inspired to create an environment that would facilitate learning skills related to animal care and farming. Additionally, she wanted to provide job opportunities for individuals with fewer opportunities.

At present, the project employs around 150 people who are in disadvantaged situations, and they work in various areas such as the farm, stores, and restaurant. The project has been successful in achieving its goals of providing education and employment opportunities for individuals with special needs. The visit was a real inspiration for all of the participants.

The third day of the third LTT was dedicated to activities centred around European institutions. The adults attended membership and policy meetings at the European Association of Service Providers for Persons with Disabilities (EASPD), where they had the opportunity to discuss their queries with professionals of diverse experience. The policy meeting was enlightening, providing insight into the practical processes involved in policy change, as well as the potential impact and limitations of these processes.

Meanwhile, the students embarked on a tour of the European Parliament. The visit to the Parliament was an eye-opener, as it highlighted the abstract and distant nature of European identity and operational mechanisms for many EU inhabitants. Additionally, it was revealed that inhabitants of recently joined European countries complain about mundane issues relating to being an EU member state.



The interactive presentation at the Parliament helped the participants to understand how they, as Europeans, are united in an important peace effort, a vision that remains very much alive today. The decisions voted within the parliament have a direct impact on the lives of all EU citizens. Overall, this experience provided the group with a better understanding of the workings of European institutions and their significance in people's daily lives.

The agenda continued with a visit to the European History Museum. It was significant for all of the participants and mainly for the students who had the opportunity to explore different periods of time.

On the final day, the BUSTA team travelled to Beauraing in the south of Belgium to visit L'Arbre Des Possibles, a democratic school whose students participated in the LTT2 in Klaipeda. The "Lycée Voyageur" school picked up the team in their impressive travelling school bus and drove them to their destination. The day was filled with games, watching a video from the Klaipeda trip and one showing the philosophy of the hosting school, a question and answer session with the founder and students of the "Lycée Voyageur." The team also had the opportunity to tour the school and reconnect with Belgian students who had previously shared the trip to Klaipeda. The visit allowed for a deeper exchange and bonding experience between participants.

The experience of hosting the school group to the headquarters of QUEST provided a unique opportunity to witness the culture and successes of democratic education. The students demonstrated their responsible and autonomous nature by harmoniously sharing household tasks, showcasing the 21st-century skills development that democratic education fosters. This experience was similar to the BUSTA activities, where an assistance dog in training was welcomed into a student's home. The partnership and collaboration between the schools allowed for a profound confirmation of the benefits of such initiatives. These types of partnerships are crucial in promoting democratic education and providing students with a well-rounded learning experience.



Developing of the eight key competences for lifelong learning

All of the activities developed and implemented by the specialists - teachers and therapists are as per with the Recommendation of European Key Competences.

Key competences refer to a set of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that are considered essential for individuals to succeed in today's society. The European Union has identified eight key competences that are necessary for lifelong learning, personal development, and active citizenship. These key competences include:

Communication in the mother tongue

The importance of using respectful language and specific terminology when discussing people with special needs and animal therapy cannot be overstated. By doing so, we create a foundation for better communication in our mother tongue. During our project, we made it a priority to implement activities that fostered this type of communication. This not only ensures that we are treating individuals with the respect they deserve, but it also helps to break down barriers and promote understanding between different groups of people.

Communication in foreign languages

Throughout their Learning, Training, and Teaching travels, students were able to not only improve their English language skills through conversation and practice, but also had the unique opportunity to familiarise themselves with other languages such as French, Flemish, Lithuanian, and Bulgarian. Basic words and phrases were memorised, allowing for a deeper understanding and appreciation of different cultures. This exposure to multiple languages not only broadens one's linguistic abilities but also promotes cross-cultural communication and understanding. The incorporation of language learning into educational programs is crucial in today's globalised world, where multilingualism is becoming increasingly important in both personal and professional settings.

Mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology

Learning about Down syndrome, Autism and other special conditions gave students a deeper understanding of the human body and why Genetics and Cognitive science are crucial fields of study. By exploring these topics, students gained insight into the complexities of the human brain and how it affects behaviour and development.

The experience of travelling to other countries and using different currencies proved to be a valuable lesson for students, as it helped them develop their calculation skills. With Bulgaria still out of the eurozone, students were required to calculate the value of their money in relation to the euro. This not only provided practical knowledge, but also the opportunity to improve their mathematical abilities.

Digital competence

Participating in photo and video shoots while engaging with the animals provided an excellent opportunity for the students to enhance their digital competencies. By capturing these moments on camera, they were able to develop their skills in photography and videography, as well as gain experience in editing and post-production.

These activities allowed the students to explore new technologies and software, such as photo, video editing and subtitling software. By learning how to use these tools effectively, they know how to create high-quality content that is engaging and visually appealing.

Learning to learn

Exposure to new environments and interactions with unfamiliar individuals can be challenging, but it also offers a unique opportunity to develop valuable learning skills. Tasks that are outside of one's comfort zone can lead to the acquisition of competencies that are applicable in a variety of settings. The diverse activities of a project can provide students with a range of experiences that foster their learning abilities. Through encountering novel situations, students are able to develop their problem-solving skills, adaptability, and creativity.

Social and civic competences

The projects' activities were designed with a fundamental goal in mind: to enhance social and civic competences. One of the key components of this goal was to develop a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by people with special needs in their daily lives. Through our work, we sought to shed light on the importance of animal therapy and dog assistance in addressing these challenges.

Sense of initiative and entrepreneurship

Once the students are fully informed of the objectives of the tasks assigned to them, empowering them to be creative and trusting their capabilities to complete the job, they become more engaged and motivated to generate innovative ideas. This observation was made across all partner organisations during the implemented activities. This approach fosters a positive learning environment that encourages collaboration and teamwork, leading to increased productivity and success. It is important to recognize the potential of each individual and provide them with the opportunity to showcase their talents. By doing so, we can unlock their full potential and achieve remarkable results.

Cultural awareness and expression

The project activities, such as travelling to other countries, sharing video messages with peers in different parts of Europe, and watching documentaries selected with the topic of the project, have contributed to enhancing students' cultural awareness and expression. By exposing them to diverse cultures and ways of life, the project activities helped to broaden students' perspectives, enabling them to appreciate and respect different customs and traditions.

Developing these key competences is an important goal of education systems in Europe, as they are essential for individuals to thrive in the modern world and participate fully in society. Teachers can support the development of key competences through a range of teaching methods and activities that promote critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving skills.

Personal Impact

Certainly! As a parent, I was touched by my daughter's experience at the Dolphin assisted therapy centre, where she had the opportunity to interact with therapy animals and professionals in the field. Her interview with the trainers gave her a unique perspective on the role that therapy animals can play in helping people with physical or mental disabilities. She gained insight into how animals can provide comfort and support to those in need. After her experience at the Lithuania sea museum Dolphin assisted therapy centre, my daughter learned about disabilities and inclusion through various educational programs. She learned about the world of people with hearing and visual impairments and tried writing and reading in Braille. She also tried using crutches and a wheelchair, which was eye-opening for her and gave her a unique perspective on the difficulties that people with physical disabilities may face daily.

She was able to create a video interview with the dolphin trainer as part of her involvement in the project. This experience taught her about the technical aspects of filming and editing a video and allowed her to practise her communication and interview skills.

As a parent, I am thrilled that my daughter had the opportunity to gain practical experience with technology and video production. In today's world, these skills are becoming increasingly important, and I believe that the Busta project has equipped my daughter with valuable skills that will serve her well in the future.

The "I am not indifferent, are you?" festival provided an incredible opportunity for my daughter to learn more about disabilities and promote inclusion. She had the chance to participate in practical activities, such as moving around with crutches or wheelchairs, and learn about the world of people with hearing and visual impairments. The festival emphasised the importance of understanding and supporting people with disabilities, and it was inspiring to see so many children come together to learn and participate.

The Busta project, which followed her experiences at the Dolphin assisted therapy centre and the festival, gave my daughter the chance to participate in the training process of therapy animals. This experience allowed her to further develop skills in communication, teamwork, and empathy, which are critical for personal and professional growth.

As a parent, I am proud of my daughter's involvement in these experiences. They have allowed her to broaden her perspective, gain empathy and understanding for others, and develop a deeper sense of compassion. Overall, I am grateful that she had the opportunity to learn about animal-assisted therapy, disabilities, and inclusion through these meaningful experiences.

As a teacher at the Democratic school in Sofia, I was curious to observe development in each of the students who took part in the project. I found the activities useful for every one of them. But for a 14-years old girl who became part of the school just after BUSTA activities had started and the group was formed, the project had a significant role. The first weeks she spent at the school were for adaptation and for a process to get to know each other better. Normally, she was shy and not open to talk a lot with the adults. One day she asked me if it is possible to include her in the group attending the ranch. With PQHFB partners decided to give her this chance during the first LTT, which took place in Bulgaria. She was so impressed by the horses and for the two days spent in the ranch she reached up the level of interaction with them the other students had. She participated in the activities at the ranch for the last two visits the school group had and she was really happy about it. She also took part in the LTT2 in Lithuania. That experience helped her a lot for faster adaptation at the school and for building relationships of trust with the teachers.