

**Título do projeto de investigação:** Grupos Aprender, Brincar, Crescer (Playgroups for Inclusion)

**General presentation:**

Project Reference: European Commission Programme for Employment and Social Solidarity - PROGRESS (2007-2013) (*Grant agreement VS/2014/0418*)

Contract Type: PROGRESS (2007-2013)

Start Date: 01-01-2015

End Date: 28-02-2017

Duration: 26 months

Project Cost: 988.243,19 €

Project Funding: 790.594,55 €

**Synopsis:**

In Portugal, 14,3% of children 3 to 6 do not enroll in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and only 37,2% under 3 years old are enrolled in licensed ECEC services (Conselho Nacional de Educação, 2012). Relatedly, employment rates for mothers with children under 3 are stable at 70.8% (OECD, 2012). Finally, accessing quality services is particularly difficult for disadvantaged communities. Therefore, these children are at increased risk of grade retention, early school dropout and social exclusion (Bennett, 2012).

This application for funding proposes a randomized control trial to evaluate the effectiveness of an alternative social policy for ECEC, Playgroups for Inclusion, targeting socially disadvantaged children aged 0-4 (including migrants and Roma) and their families, not participating in the currently available ECEC services, particularly those unemployed and underemployed.

The 3 main components of this social policy involve:

- Empowering disadvantaged children, ensuring that they benefit from early opportunities for learning and development;
- Empowering families and carers, improving their caregiving environment, parenting skills, employment expectations, and intercultural dialogue;
- Empowering unemployed members of disadvantaged communities to act as 'playgroup facilitators' and community mobilisers;

The planned intervention aims to affect three interrelated outcomes:

- Children's developmental outcomes. We aim to reduce socially disadvantaged children's developmental gaps in cognitive and social domains, and hence reduce the likelihood of future school failure and social exclusion during compulsory schooling;

- Parent and parenting outcomes. We aim to increase the quality of caregiving environment and parents' mental health, and reduce the risk of dysfunctional family environments and parental unemployment;

- Community outcomes. Increase social cohesion, participation and intercultural dialogue in the communities.

### **Aims:**

Playgroups for Inclusion is an integrated policy experimentation that aims to develop, test, validate and disseminate innovative approaches to increase access to high quality early childhood education and care for children aged 0-4 and their families, with a particular focus on those individuals and groups that currently are not benefiting from the opportunities of early education, such as girls, children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children belonging to indigenous or minority groups (e.g. the Roma), children from migrant families, children who are orphaned or lack parental care, refugee and asylum-seeking families, children infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS and children of alcohol or drug-addicted parents.

Playgroups for Inclusion is a small scale experiment of an early investment designed to prevent disadvantages from compounding and to break the intergenerational transmission of poverty and exclusion. It envisages the empowerment of deprived people through their active involvement in a social experimentation that is testing the impact of a new measure on a small scale with a view to up-scale it if its effectiveness is demonstrated. To do so, a strong partnership between government institutions and the civil society has been established, creating the optimal conditions for mutual learning, dissemination and mainstreaming.

By doing so, the partnership will contribute to the H2020 targets, namely those related with the employment strategy, early school leaving and social exclusion, strengthening gender equality and Roma integration.

The project Playgroups for Inclusion specifically aims to:

1. Create a basic structure for the management, communication and dissemination of the project;
2. Benchmark and develop high-quality, context-sensitive, training and facilitators manuals for the playgroups;
3. Train the trainers (pre-school teachers) and community playgroup facilitators;
4. Randomly assign beneficiaries (children and families) to the treatment (playgroups) or to the control condition;
5. Implement the playgroups for one year;
6. Monitor the implementation of the playgroups;
7. Rigorously evaluate the intervention by comparing pre-test and post-test outcomes in randomly assigned intervention and control conditions, using valid, precise and internationally-recognised instruments;
8. Feed lessons and results into national policy reference groups with a view to policy reform and scale-up;

9. Carry out a peer review of implementation and evaluation to ensure quality and consistency;
10. Disseminate learning through a dedicated website, regional seminars, fundraising

**Partners:**

- Ministério da Educação e Ciência (MEC), Direção Geral de Educação (DGE) **(coordinator)**
- Universidade de Coimbra (UC), Faculdade de Psicologia e Ciências da Educação
- Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (FCG)
- Fundação Bissaya Barreto (FBB)
- ISCTE – Instituto Universitário de Lisboa
- Alto Comissariado para as Migrações (ACM)

**Planned actions:**

The project is organized around 5 articulated areas of action (see WP in D.7).

Regarding Policy Design, the Playgroups for Inclusion consortium will empower approximately 50 unemployed residents in deprived communities nationwide to act as community facilitators and facilitate every-other-day 2 hour sessions (playgroups) with a sample of approximately 500 children aged 0-4 and their carers, not covered by any type of currently available ECEC service. Sessions will be held in diverse community settings (schools, libraries, shops, malls, markets, Roma settlements, among others) and cover a predefined set of topics that include health, early learning&development, literacy, numeracy, play and parenting skills. In the course of a 45-week programme, parents and carers will also have the opportunity to participate in group and one-to-one discussions on subjects such as health, education and training, personal management and finances, job seeking competences, and personal and professional development.

Regarding monitoring and evaluation, the Playgroups for Inclusion consortium proposes a carefully designed randomized-controlled trial of children and their families to two conditions: the Playgroups for Inclusion intervention group and the control group. The proposed conditions for this trial include:

- a) A careful power analysis estimating Minimum Detectable Effects (MDE) for child-level and playgroup-level outcomes under different assumptions for the type of design, the percentage of the variance explained by the covariate (pre-test) employed, and the number of participants per group.
- b) A pre-test prior to the randomized assignment to the Playgroups for Inclusion to deal with Hawthorne and John Henry effects.
- c) A phase-in design, i.e. the randomization of all recruited families within each district to two conditions: the Playgroups for Inclusion intervention group, which will receive the intervention in the year 2015/2016, and the control group, which will receive a brief version of the intervention (3 months) in the following months.
- d) A monitoring plan through an embedded study of the fidelity of implementation of the programme. Monitoring of the fidelity of implementation of an intervention is as crucial as a rigorously designed impact evaluation of that same intervention.
- e) A post-test evaluation paying considerable attention to potential no-shows and cross-overs as well as other potential threats to the internal validity of the experiment include selective attrition .
- f) A proposed set of measures chosen balancing the following criteria: 1) relevance to domains assessed and availability of Portuguese/European norms; 2) psychometric

validity and reliability; 3) measures used in other recent international studies of young children and their families, to facilitate cross-study comparison; 4) cultural-sensitivity.

Regarding sustainability and stakeholder involvement, the consortium proposes a strategy that is based in a strong participation of all actors in all phases of the social experimentation. As examples we highlight: the creation of a steering committee composed by key regional and national actors; local participatory consultations at the district and community levels; continuous transnational networking and peer reviews.

National and international events will be held in order to raise awareness and explore possibilities for dissemination.

Regarding communication and dissemination, the consortium developed a comprehensive plan that defines the purpose of the communication/dissemination activities, targeted audience, contents to be conveyed and the combination of methods to do so. For further details, please see (Annex E.1).

Finally, the consortium proposed a careful plan of organization, administration and finance that will ensure good communication among partners, sound financial management and high-quality reporting.

### **Deliverables:**

The project is organized around 5 articulated Work Packages:

#### Workpackage 1 – Policy Design - will focus on:

1. An intensive needs diagnosis that will allow a fine description of risk factors to be addressed in the experiment and to identify target communities;
2. The development of a structured protocol for the experimental sessions, based on a extensive review of the literature, benchmarking with existing ECEC worldwide networks and contacts with previous PROGRESS grantees;
3. The recruitment of community facilitators, leveraging on existing local social networks such as civil society organizations, social inclusion projects, among others;
4. The development and implementation of an in-service training program for the facilitators;
5. Packaging of the model drawing on the lessons learned through implementation, monitorization and evaluation, including peers assessment, to produce a final report with guidelines for interested stakeholders and recommendations at a policy level.

#### Workpackage 2 - Monitoring and Evaluation - will focus on:

1. Development of the experimental and monitoring design;
2. Collection of pre-test data;
3. Randomization of participants to experimental and control conditions;
4. Monitoring of implementation of playgroups through videotaping, and trainings using standardized measures;

5. Collection of post-test evidences of impact;
6. Analysis of a) intent-to-treat impacts; b) Treatment-on-the-treated impacts, accounting for endogeneity of take-up, possible cross-overs and low take-up rates;
7. Analysis of fidelity, dosage, quality and responsiveness of implementation;
8. Intermediate on-going report;
9. Final report and recommendations for policy development;

Workpackage 3 – Sustainability and stakeholder involvement - will focus on:

1. Collection of information about existing resources in the selected territories;
2. Establishment of partnerships with local entities to develop the experimentation;
3. Creation and management of a Steering Committee with key stakeholders (experts, public authorities, corporate social responsibility associations, parents and migrants associations, among others);
4. Promotion of fundraising events and showcases to media and wider population.

Workpackage 4 - Communication and Dissemination – will focus on:

1. Creation of a dedicated project website;
2. Development of an online bilingual newsletter;
3. Creation of Playgroups for Inclusion facilitators' manual;
4. 'Play and Learn' brochures and Facilitators' Training manual;
5. Participation in Radio shows and local newspapers;
6. Preparation of project reports (intermediate, synthesis report of the peer review, final report of experimental phase, final report of the project);
7. Organisation of intermediate seminars;
8. Organisation of the transnational Peer Review;
9. Organisation of a final high-level conference.

Workpackage 5 – Organisation, Administration and Finance

1. Participation in the kick-off PROGRESS seminar in Brussels;
2. Permanent coordination between the partners: monthly on-line meetings; quarterly 'all day meetings', organization of site visits;
3. Production of quarterly follow-up reports against estimated physical and financial plans;
4. Overall financial control of the project;

5. Technical direction and management of the project.