



**INCLUSIVE  
EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION**

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**Case Study Visit Report:**

**Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão, Portugal, 2–4 March 2016**



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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Full version</b>
ECE:	Early childhood education
EU:	European Union
IECE:	Inclusive Early Childhood Education
IEP:	Individual Education Plan
IQ:	Intelligence quotient
NECIS:	National Early Childhood Intervention System
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAG:	Project Advisory Group
RTI:	Response to Intervention
SEN:	Special educational needs
TEIP:	Priority Intervention Educational Territories



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is on a case study visit to an example of inclusive ECE provision in Portugal. It is one of eight such visits that form part of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project, conducted by the European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education (the Agency) between 2015 and 2017.

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and country experts visited a group of schools called the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão, located in Paços de Ferreira (Porto Metropolitan Area), Portugal, from 2 to 4 March 2016. They observed classes and interviewed different stakeholder groups: principal, teachers, support teachers, parents and children.

The provision was found to be a very good reflection of the shift towards inclusive education in Portugal as a whole, where, over the past two decades, every child's right to a quality education in mainstream schools has undergone constant development.

In addition, the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão has experienced significant transformation over the past three-and-a-half years, as the local council and school leaders were determined to ensure that all the children in the local community had the opportunity to succeed in school and in life, despite the difficult prevailing socio-economic situation and unemployment rate. The main highlight of this inclusive provision was found to be the creation of shared responsibility and collaborative engagement among all stakeholders in the attempt to reach out to all children and families in the local community.

Analysis of all the data collected revealed five main themes adopted by the stakeholders to ensure inclusive ECE provision. This report is structured around the five themes, namely:

- 1 Believe that all children can succeed
- 2 Ensure the active participation of all
- 3 Focus on children's strengths
- 4 Promote shared responsibility and collaboration
- 5 Ensure quality provision.

Theme 1 is evident in all the stakeholders' clear vision and commitment to enabling all families and children in the community to make effective use of the provisions, no matter what their characteristics or situation.

Theme 2 is manifest in the very friendly school atmosphere, in which all children feel that they belong and are expected to participate. Teachers listen to children's needs

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and encourage peer interaction, helping all children to be part of their class group's learning and social activities.

Theme 3 is clear in the child-centred approach, with a focus on each child's needs and individual level of development, and a holistic curriculum that enhances each child's well-being and happiness and their healthy growth and learning. Child initiative in learning activities is encouraged through structures that enable children to engage according to their choices and interests.

Theme 4 is evidenced in the shared values and responsibility among everybody – children, parents, teachers, support staff and policy-makers. This includes co-operation between staff and parents and an impressive 'spirit of collaboration' that is facilitated through distributive leadership and the holding of regular collaborative meetings.

Theme 5 emerges in the recruitment of trained staff and the provision of continuous in-service training, as well as the deliberate use of peer observation and shared evaluation of children's learning, with universal screening and continuous assessment of each child's progress.

The visiting team considered this provision a very striking example of the potential transformation of ECE provisions into more inclusive settings, and particularly of how systemic collaborative and reflective practice can ensure continuous improvement of a setting's inclusivity.



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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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Finally, the Agency would like to acknowledge the key role of the PAG members and national experts who took part in the visit and provided additional support.

## PREAMBLE: THE IECE PROJECT

This report on the case study visit to the ECE provisions of the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão, Portugal, is part of the Inclusive Early Childhood Education (IECE) project, conducted by the Agency from 2015 to 2017. The project includes a total of eight such visits in different EU countries.

The project's overall goal is to identify, analyse and subsequently promote the main characteristics of quality inclusive ECE for all children from three years old to the start of primary education.

Thus the project focuses on the structures and processes that can ensure a systemic approach to providing high-quality inclusive ECE that effectively meets the academic and social learning needs of all the children from the school group's local community.

The project started off with a focus on the five thematic areas for improving ECE that were raised by EU and OECD working groups for this field (EU, 2014; OECD, 2014):

- Access and procedures in early years education for all children. This includes the most vulnerable, such as children with SEN, at-risk children, children with severe disabilities, immigrants and newcomers. Information for families, parent participation, etc., form part of this area.
- Workforce – staff and roles, the professionals' organisational status, initial and in-service staff training, values and attitudes, leadership, support teachers' role, collaboration with parents, co-operation with external personnel, collaboration with health and social services.
- Curriculum/content – focus on all aspects of the child's development (cognitive, social, emotional and physical), learning, participation, pedagogy, preschool environment and relationships, and child perspectives.
- Evaluation and monitoring – crucial role of early identification and first assessment process, on-going assessment of children and teachers' work.
- Governance and funding – role of leadership, accountability, funding models.

Project activity and project outputs will include:

- A literature and policy review providing the conceptual framework for the project and including a review of international and European research literature and policy papers on ECE.
- Country reports providing information on policy and practice in inclusive ECE for all children at national level.

- A synthesis report on the ‘state of the art’ in Europe in relation to policy and practice in ECE for all children in inclusive settings. The information provided in the country reports will form the basis of said report.
- EU practitioners’ perceptions of and practices for inclusive ECE: an analysis of descriptions of example inclusive ECE provisions from 26 EU countries.
- Detailed reports of the eight selected case study sites, including analysis of the key project themes investigated.
- Recommendations designed to meet policy-makers’ needs: the project synthesis report will draw on evidence from all project activities; the key issues/factors facilitating quality inclusion in ECE will be analysed and translated into recommendations.
- A self-assessment/self-reflection tool for the ECE setting.

## **1. INTRODUCTION: SELECTED CASE STUDY VISIT 1 OF THE IECE PROJECT**

This report provides information about the case study visit that the Agency team conducted in Portugal in March 2016.

The Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão was selected, along with seven other sites, from examples of inclusive practice in ECE submitted by national experts and Agency Representative Board members. The eight selected examples were willing to be visited and studied by a project team in order to understand the quality features of inclusive ECE provision.

In order to support the countries in identifying examples of inclusive practice in ECE, the Agency team, in collaboration with the PAG members, established criteria that the example provision were expected to meet. These criteria, which were also used for selecting the eight examples, were: relevance of the site, clarity of the information provided, and evidence of the following: respect for diversity; promotion of participation and engagement; holistic curriculum; skilled workforce; collaboration and partnership; smooth transitions; quality assurance and self-evaluation to inform improvement.

The selected examples also needed to reflect diverse geographical locations across Europe.

A team of Agency staff, PAG members and country experts visited a group of schools, the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão, located in Paços de Ferreira (Porto Metropolitan Area), Portugal, from 2 to 4 March 2016. The visit provided opportunities to hear first-hand about developments in the schools' ECE provisions, to observe classes and to interview different stakeholder groups: principal, teachers, support teachers, parents and children. Interviews were conducted according to a schedule to provide consistency across the eight project case study visits. In addition, relevant documents on national and regional policy and practice were collected prior to and during the visit. All these sources of evidence have been used to draft this report. All visiting project participants provided first impressions at a forum on the last day of the visit and then submitted written feedback about the inclusive features of the ECE provision at the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão.

An analysis of all the above data led to the identification of five themes in how the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão is enhancing the inclusivity of its ECE provision. Themes 1, 4 and 5 describe inclusive structures related to inclusive policies, organisation and staff quality, while Themes 2 and 3 describe the inclusive processes that ensure each child is actually engaged in learning and social activities:

- 1 Believe that all children can succeed
- 2 Ensure the active participation of all

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- 3 Focus on children's strengths
  - 4 Promote shared responsibility and collaboration
  - 5 Ensure quality provision.

These are described in detail in Sections 4 to 8 of this report. However, the following two sections give an account of the background of inclusive provision within Portugal's education system and the Frazão local community (in Section 2), followed by a description, in Section 3, of the main highlight of the setting's inclusive structures and processes.

## 2. THE CONTEXT

### 2.1 Inclusive education in Portugal

In Portugal, preschool education serves children from three to six years old – the age of transition to compulsory primary education. Preschool education is optional, as the law acknowledges that the family has the primary role in childcare and education (Law 5/97 of 10 February). Nevertheless, Law 65/2015 of 3 July, amending Law 85/2009 of 27 August, establishes the universality of preschool education for all children, from the year they turn four years of age. Legislative orders defining the guidelines for classroom organisation and opening hours for educational institutions are published annually. For the current school year, Legislative Order 7-B/2015 of 7 May states that priority must be given to older children and those with SEN (in accordance with Decree-Law 3/2008 of 7 January).

The Portuguese education system encompasses three years of preschool education, which are not compulsory, and nine years of mandatory schooling divided into three cycles (first cycle – four years; second cycle – two years; third cycle – three years).

To meet the SEN of children attending preschool education, Decree-Law 3/2008 establishes educational measures that aim, among other things, to achieve educational success and to prepare learners for further studies. These measures must be set out in an Individual Education Plan (IEP) and are applied whenever a child is eligible for specialised support to carry out the activities and experiences included in the common curriculum that is being implemented with the group to which the child belongs. Such measures encompass adaptations to the curriculum design that depart significantly from this common framework so as to meet the needs of individual children. It is mandatory for the IEP to be prepared jointly by the preschool teacher responsible for the class, by the special education teacher, by the parents, and by other professionals that may be involved in the child's educational process.

Decree-Law 281/2009 established a National Early Childhood Intervention System (NECIS), as a shared responsibility of the Ministries of Health, of Education, and of Labour, Solidarity and Social Security, with the collaboration of Private Social Solidarity Institutions, and in close co-operation with families. The NECIS aims to provide early childhood intervention to children between 0 and 6 years, who are at risk of developmental delay or have established conditions, and to their families.

Local intervention teams, comprising professionals from different disciplines within the three ministries, perform their activities in defined geographical areas.

In the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão, there are two children attending preschool classrooms who are eligible and benefit from measures under Decree-Law



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3/2008. In addition to the support given under this legislation, there is the collaboration of community institutions in health, social and other areas, depending on the children's needs.

(More information about the Portuguese inclusive education system is available in the country report, in the description of the example and in Portugal's national overview: <https://www.european-agency.org/national-policy-and-provision/portugal>).

## 2.2 The Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão

The Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão, located in the north of Portugal, includes four schools (Arreigada Basic School, Frazão Basic School, Seroa Basic School and Basic School of Frazão), serving 1,192 pupils from preschool to the third cycle of basic education. There are 11 preschool classrooms, attended by 250 children aged from two to six years, from different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. There is a high percentage of pupils with low socio-economic status.

Most of the classes are heterogeneous in terms of learner age and children vary in the number of years they have attended preschool. Only five classrooms are homogeneous regarding children's age. Most of the classes have children who are attending preschool for the first time. Typically, children attend preschool for two years (when they are four and five years old).

The schools aim to ensure that all children in the community attend preschool education. According to the school register, about 4% of pupils attending primary school did not attend preschool education, which has led the schools to organise dissemination activities within the community about the importance of preschool education, implemented through the parish and local councils and through close contact and communication between staff, parents and other community members.

There is a diversity of children in need of additional support, but only two of them are eligible for special education services under the special education legislation, Decree-Law 3/2008. Mainstream teachers provide support to all the children as part of regular activities in the classroom, adapting activities in order to promote each child's participation and engagement.

Each classroom has a preschool teacher, responsible for planning, organising, implementing and evaluating educational activities. Operational assistants support the preschool teachers.

The preschool teachers work collaboratively, jointly organising curricular activities. These activities are framed by a holistic approach and based on curriculum guidelines, aiming to promote all aspects of children's development and learning. Lesson plans include the following areas:



- Personal and social education
- Knowledge of the world
- Oral language and writing
- Mathematics
- Expression
- New technologies.

The children in need of additional support benefit from differentiated measures, if necessary. These measures are mostly of an educational nature and are developed in the context of the classroom, in collaboration with the family. The adaptations for children with special needs try to follow the ‘minimal intervention’ approach. At the primary-school level, the Integrated Support Service for Learning Improvement provides support according to the Response to Intervention model (RTI), emphasising collaborative and preventive interventions.

The leadership promotes staff collaboration and opportunities for professional development by allocating time for joint work and co-ordination with other professionals, such as school teachers and a school psychologist, and enabling the involvement of external experts in key areas.

### **3. THE SETTING'S HIGHLIGHT: SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLABORATION**

As expected, the ECE provisions in the Agrupamento de Escolas de Frazão were using several structures and processes that enhanced their inclusivity. However, the case study visitors were struck by how all stakeholders felt responsible for enabling all children to learn and collaborated in all their activities. The key message is ‘collaborative work’.

As had already been pointed out in the school group’s proposal, this was no accident:

*The school has some opportunities for real collaboration between professionals, between professionals and families and between school and community. As an example, the preschool teachers meet regularly, aiming to set goals, plan activities and to evaluate the teaching process and the results. The meeting times are intentionally planned and set by the school leadership.*

It was found that the schools’ present inclusive situation was the result of its project over the past three years: the local education authority (local council of 50,000) had been faced with many children experiencing school failure. The usual excuse was that this was a socio-economically deprived area, and school achievement could not be improved because parents were not supportive of their children’s education. However, the council decided that the school group could in fact make a difference if there was a joint effort to improve the education system.

The school group became one of the TEIP schools that were to be afforded increased resources, but had to prove that it was achieving results in terms of children’s learning. A new principal of the four schools was appointed and over the past three years he has developed a collaboration-based management system.

Now the school group is run on the basis of leadership that enables everybody to take responsibility and feel proud because they can see the outcomes. The council’s four schools are given space for their own management and teachers have a say in school organisation. Teachers show great enthusiasm and share in celebrations, such as during the case study visit when they prepared traditional local food for lunch. Each of the three schools that were visited provided a different welcome and gave different types of gifts to the visitors.

Distributed leadership was evident in many other ways. Different people are responsible for different initiatives – or ‘Actions’ – for improving school effectiveness, such as the ‘Pedagogical Support Service’ and the ‘Integrated Learning Improvement Service’. The principal himself took responsibility for the ‘Collaborate to Learn’ Action. He had the support of the local council and of the community, with notices for parents about activities also announced in the church. The principal also

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employed a psychologist to develop a collaborative structure. The psychologist created collaborative problem-solving opportunities through regular in-service training, and structured teachers' time in such a way that they could meet and develop learning strategies and curricula together, based on the idea that the best way to ensure quality delivery was through 'pedagogical supervision' whereby the teachers had the opportunity to observe each other teaching.

The school teachers mentioned that one of the most important measures for promoting quality in inclusive education is through collaborative work among staff, both formally and informally, for developing and sharing teaching materials, methods and strategies for children's engagement and achievement. There was staff collective responsibility – one teacher said, 'It's like they are our children'. When staff members were asked how they have the energy to attend to each child's needs, they replied, 'It's our job'. This was matched with collaboration at all levels of the school system.

## **4. THEME 1: BELIEVE THAT ALL CHILDREN CAN SUCCEED**

The first striking inclusive feature of the school group was its commitment to enabling all children in the locality to succeed. There was a shared commitment to what the principal described as an endeavour to:

*... improve children's social and academic results by providing an excellent service to all pupils and the community ... Our policy is to never let anyone down. The school belongs to all and is for all.*

Faced with a situation of high school absenteeism and school dropout within a deprived community, all stakeholders joined in the belief that all children could be helped to:

*... become responsible citizens, [...] successful, productive and happy, respecting social, cultural and moral values and differences, turning them into citizens of a wider world.*

### **4.1 Provide access for all and promote respect for diversity**

All the children in the locality are welcome in the schools. Teachers share the value of inclusion; they said that 'It is normal that children are different'. Diversity is regarded as natural for the schools, particularly because of the heterogeneity of home backgrounds in a local area with low-income families and a high rate of unemployment. The fact that the schools are a central part of life for children and also for many parents can be interpreted as a quality indicator. Moreover, most of the preschool classrooms (6 out of 11) are heterogeneous in terms of children's age and children vary in the number of years they have attended preschool. It is a challenge with both positive and negative aspects. Concentration and attention span is different for different age cohorts (three- to six-year-olds). However, the staff believe that children learn through interaction between different ages and through acceptance of diversity, by being positive. The older children are encouraged to engage with the younger children. The teachers pointed out that they take advantage of the situation: 'The cleverer children help their classmates with more needs'. Based on a plan drawn up each morning, the five-year-olds give their support in different tasks according to age/abilities. Children can also engage in the same activities at different levels.

The children's socio-economic context is not overlooked. The schools provide opportunities which the children do not have at home. The parents particularly mentioned the importance of children engaging in play at school because they do not do so at home; they also mentioned the value of the schools having a system that teaches their children to follow rules – something which they find difficult to do at home. The schools have an initiative for developing healthy eating habits because

of concerns about the lack thereof in homes. The school group offers educational outings (cinema, theatre and activities including gymnastics and music). Because of concerns about literacy levels, the children receive books as birthday presents and, each week, they take a book home from the school library to read with their family.

The value of inclusion seems to be built into all teaching. It is the basic value of the whole education system. No child is left behind. The schools value happiness and well-being for all children. This resulted in the observed general atmosphere of happiness at school. One father highlighted: ‘My child wakes up and looks forward to going to school. She is very happy there and she hates the weekends’. The parents that the case study visitors met all reported this feeling in their children.

Teachers support children’s participation in all activities and as, one teacher indicated, ‘We try alternative ways if a child does not respond’. In the discussion with children, they highlighted that they have learnt a lot of interesting things, that the teachers give them work they like to do, and that they will play and sing for other children in order to make them happy. They looked contented, friendly, self-confident, aware of the rules and prepared to follow them while being creative in their activities.

#### **4.2 Provision of additional support as a regular feature**

During the visit and the discussion with stakeholders, it was indicated that the classroom teacher is responsible for all children and is co-responsible, along with the support staff and the parents, for the Individualised Support Plan of those children who need it.

In the interviews with the teachers and support teachers, it was highlighted that the classroom teachers observe, reflect on and plan what needs to be done. The schools have introduced a universal screening system, whereby teachers have a checklist to assess each child’s progress and identify difficulties and opportunities. The conceptual model behind this multi-tiered system of integrated support for learning improvement values prevention over individual remediation. Parents also participate in this process – each parent receives a questionnaire so teachers can formulate their decisions. This procedure is seen as a challenging task for teachers in the first two months of the school year. Shared information/guidelines/observation tools are uploaded to a common platform. Each child’s progress is evaluated three times a year. Teachers feel that the children belong to them and this ensures that the children’s progress is their business.

Assessments to establish the need for additional support are based, firstly, on direct observation, particularly of the child’s interaction with peers. This is followed by verification activities (contact with parents, consultation with family doctor regarding development). The school psychologist establishes the link between



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school and family and holds consultation meetings with teachers, providing support according to their needs. The schools consider early childhood intervention very important, but try to avoid a focus on classification based on diagnosis and the use of psychometric testing, instead favouring developmental scales and curriculum-based observation as assessment tools. The schools also link with local support services (e.g. speech therapist, another school psychologist to divide work, etc.).

As an example, they referred to three children with disabilities (cerebral palsy, global developmental delay) attending the schools, who are identified as eligible for additional support and benefit from measures under Decree-Law 3/2008. The school measures are in accordance with the law which, as well as considering the features of the disability, also considers the impact on learning. A special education teacher (one in each school for a few hours each day) provides in-class support. The support teachers focus on helping and supporting the staff and the children, by preparing pedagogical materials, observing peer interaction, etc.

Assistants are in different classes and the principal assigns them roles. There is also additional support staff for music, mathematics, etc.

There are other children who have difficulties and are given adequate support. The schools specify learning objectives for each of these children, namely what results need to be achieved. Parents participate in this assessment-intervention process, by suggesting what they want their child to achieve. At the end of each term (three terms per year) the programme is evaluated and reformulated. The class teacher is responsible for ensuring progress. The child is always included in class with additional support as required. In the planning process, children's interests and needs are accounted for (e.g. a child who uses a wheelchair can express herself and thus she can express her needs which are considered to be met).

Motivation is regarded as key for all children. Children are engaged according to their different needs and interests. Good relationships are established to support motivation and ensure interaction.

The teachers and support staff seem to be skilled, competent and open-minded towards colleagues, children, parents and the local community. They are proud of their work.

#### **4.3 Promote parental engagement and family support**

One of the challenges of the attempt to raise achievement was how to engage parents, within a socio-economically deprived setting, to support their children's attendance and learning. This has been achieved through a variety of strategies. For example, each school has a parents' council that represents parents' perspectives and meets every month to discuss different issues. It meets with community bodies,

school management, etc., and organises activities with and for children, including fundraising for the schools. The parents' council members that the case study visitors met showed a great sense of being part of the educational endeavours of the staff and local council. Parents also participate in activities organised by the schools, such as Carnival and Christmas parties.

The school group organises events on Saturdays, so that every parent can participate. Each parent has three opportunities each year to meet the teacher and discuss their child's progress. One hour each week of the teachers' timetables is allotted for parents' visits. Pupils are instructed to take work home to show to their parents. They also make cards for their parents on Mother's Day and Father's Day as well as on other occasions, such as Christmas.

In one current project aiming to improve literacy, parents are invited to Saturday reading sessions – listening to a story and discussing it. Children are given an invitation to take home to their parents and grandparents. A total of 26 families have participated. Teachers run this project on a voluntary basis by roster.

Parents are very happy with the service because their children are happy at school. As one mother pointed out: 'My child is very happy, wakes up happy and eager to go to school and to go to meet the teacher'. They feel that their child is 'cherished', has a good relationship with the teacher and their progress is monitored. If any concerns arise, the teacher contacts the parents and makes changes to meet the needs of the child and their family. The teacher is always ready to listen to the parents and ask their opinion. Adjustments are made for families to pick up children at different times or to attend various activities.

Parents stated that they are proud of the schools. Teachers were also happy with the relationship with the parents. School staff talked very respectfully about parents. They consider them to be experts on their children. Co-operation was clearly evident. Parents seemed very satisfied with the schools and they volunteer to carry out tasks for the schools.

Many of the teachers and staff have worked in the schools for a long time, which means that they also know many families and the older siblings of the preschool children. The schools are child-centred and family-centred. The children know the staff for a long time, and there are networks around the children through relations with family and relatives. This is a relevant aspect of the learning environment's quality.

In the interviews and discussions with parents, they indicated several good points about the schools: great professionals (both teachers and support professionals); modern resources/facilities and infrastructure; and a good relationship between the schools, families and the community. In general, parents know each other and have



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elected a parent to act as a speaker for all the parents in each school (meetings every month, organising parties and activities for children). The schools follow the children's individual progress and regularly communicate this information to families; there is a good relationship/collaboration between teachers and parents and also between teachers and children; the children feel good about and at school; the children are developing holistically while being happy to attend school and learn; teachers communicate with parents about their children's needs and interests; whenever there is a problem (e.g. when children do not eat), the schools talk to the parents to understand why.

They also highlighted that there is no discrimination and all children are welcomed, accepted and celebrated while they are taught to help each other – for example, children with Chinese, Roma or other ethnic backgrounds are treated as equals. There are vegetarian children attending the schools and this is viewed as an opportunity for the children to learn about each other's differences. Children are cherished and loved at school (e.g. individual photos – over 200 – with Father Christmas were offered to children and sent to every family). Events are open to the whole community. Activities are held outside school hours and parents appreciate teachers' voluntary participation. The parish church is also asked to make announcements and invite the whole community to participate in organised events. Parents work, but always find the time to participate in activities at school.

An institution takes care of the children before and after school hours.

The schools have an important role and they involve children in activities which they do not have time for at home, particularly playing with toys and with peers, while they are taught the rules of interaction and discipline.

Some activities that the parents said they appreciate include singing, dancing, doing lots of drawings, writing, reading, number work, leadership skills, and the transmission of values, such as distinguishing between right and wrong. The children are happy and feel responsible. The schools suggest ways for parents to be involved with their children (quality time). Children prepare gifts for their parents to celebrate events, like Father's Day and Mother's Day.

Parents' satisfaction was explicit: 'You won't find a better school in the whole country', 'Good organisation and happy children', 'Good conditions and professionals', 'Dedicated teachers who love the children', 'Feeling of belonging'.

## **5. THEME 2: ENSURE THE ACTIVE PARTICIPATION OF ALL**

The visitors' observations confirmed the parents' satisfaction with the attention their children receive. The services centre on the child, but also on the family's strengths and needs, and focus on enabling each child to participate in learning and social activities through constant interaction with the teacher and their peers.

### **5.1 Child-centred approach**

During the case study visit, child-centred displays were in evidence all around the schools and classrooms. Near the doors there were displays of sets of photographs of children according to their pick-up group for going home; in the classrooms there were *quadros de presenças* (attendance boards) that children fill in daily and that show school attendance for the current week. Displays of children's work were all over the walls of the classrooms and corridors and hanging from the ceiling. This child-centred approach was also clear in diverse children's involvement in the visit's opening session: three pupils compered the evening, one pupil played drums with support, while a group of pupils sang together. Similarly, the children greeted and said goodbye to the case study visitors in each school: in one school, a child in a wheelchair was enabled to be with her peers rather than with the assistant and her peers helped her to wave a flag.

Moreover, through their own initiative, the schools involved the children in welcoming and indeed compering the activities during the first evening of the formal presentation of the school group, as well as during the observation visits to three of the schools. In addition, the classrooms were full of pupils' work as well as pupil attendance lists and other tasks with accompanying photos.

Teachers engaged empathetically with each child. Staff talked kindly to children; the atmosphere was very warm. They were very sensitive to individual children's needs – one child who was not feeling so confident was allowed to hold the teacher's hand as she moved around the class; another teacher hugged a child to show approval, etc. ECE educators were not only a constant guide for the children, but also played with them. It seems that both children and staff are proud and have fun together, help each other and build for the future together.

### **5.2 Enabling collaborative peer interaction**

The teachers also valued and promoted good relationships among peers. In the staff interview, the case study visitors asked them about the lone children who had been observed in the class. They told the visitors that they gradually teach these children how to be with other children. The ECE educators emphasised children's attitudes: they mentioned that they work on the children's attitudes if there are any



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interaction problems. One parent mentioned that she was especially happy with one of the school rules: 'All children are friends with each other'.

In the interviews, staff indicated that they find it difficult to diversify teaching to engage each child. However, they regularly address participation issues. There are teachers' meetings every two weeks where they can share concerns about children's progress. They focus on collaborative work – teachers plan together and discuss their problems, share strategies and exchange goals in the process of reflective practice. Teachers try to improve children's engagement by building up collaborative groups with more and less 'experienced' children; they provide tasks with different levels of attainment; when some children finish their work, they are encouraged to help those classmates who need it.

They also develop preventive strategies in teaching to inform and initiate collaboration with classmates: a mother of a child with a hearing impairment explained how the teacher had instructed the schoolmates on how to speak and communicate with her son.

The impact of all the educational endeavour of the schools, as well as each child, has inspired the motto: 'Small steps lead to a greater step and the desired result'.

## **6. THEME 3: FOCUS ON CHILDREN'S STRENGTHS**

During the visit, there was not a single comment about a child being too difficult to manage or having too many learning difficulties to engage in learning with their peers. Teachers avoid classifying pupils and instead use flexible and formative assessment aimed at developing each child's potential within a holistic and individualised curriculum.

The teachers are enthusiastic about the children's achievement. They work to enable the children to make a success of their lives. This was illustrated in the fact that the schools maintain contact with pupils after they have left secondary school: the case study visitors were given a gift (jewellery box) produced by former pupils who are now following a vocational programme.

### **6.1 Teachers support child initiative**

During the visit and the discussions with the different stakeholders, it was observed that all children are engaged in whatever interests them, sometimes on their own and most often with peers.

The teachers are there as a support. Support can be socio-emotional, as already observed in Theme 2. Teachers also provide regular on-the-spot support for learning – to get them to play with materials, to make suggestions or, in the case of a child with SEN, to engage in one-to-one teaching of vocabulary.

There was a most striking balance between child-initiated and rule-governed behaviour, as during child-chosen activities:

- Children were provided with a wide variety of different classroom areas – painting easel, dressing up and other materials for role play, carpeted area for floor play with vehicles, Lego, etc., computer corner (with three computers), round tables for drawing or writing or constructive play – jigsaws, etc.
- Children were informed how many could be in an area at any one time and had to indicate on a board which station they were going to be at.
- There were lists of rules for behaviour in class, and a chart in each class showing points children earned for good behaviour: they could be grounded.

There was also evidence that structured teaching involved themes that would enthuse the children; for example, during the visit the theme was snow.

In the interviews with the teachers and support teachers, it was clearly stated that positive reinforcement of children is encouraged and they indicated the most important points of their pedagogy:

- Motivate the child

- Provide positive reinforcement
- Organise calm classrooms away from the stress of the outside world
- Give importance to outdoor activities
- Build an active relationship with the family
- Provide individual attention to each child
- Use reflective practice fed by continuous learning/professional development
- Philosophy of education – inspired by Freinet's modern school movement
- Play viewed as most important – learning through play
- Goal of curriculum: communication, social, world knowledge, expression.

## **6.2 A holistic curriculum approach that applies to all children's needs**

Learning activities are based on a holistic approach to the curriculum, aiming to promote all aspects of children's development and learning. Indeed, one of the schools' initiatives is to promote healthy diets and self-care, as evidenced in the address, during the first introductory evening, by the nurse engaged in this initiative. Formally, lesson plans include the following areas:

- Personal and social education
- Knowledge of the world
- Oral language and writing
- Mathematics
- Expression
- New technologies.

Moreover, structured teaching is often through engagement in projects that involve different areas of learning. The psychologist gave the example of the use of particular stories, such as *The Gigantic Turnip*:

*Teachers read and explored this book. Then, based on its content, they carried out oral comprehension, phonemic and phonological awareness and maths activities. Finally, children from different classes and teachers role-played the story. They also grew potatoes, beans and other vegetables, observed and recorded the vegetables' growth, and cooked a soup by following a recipe.*

Observation in the classrooms showed how all areas of child development are addressed and that, in addition to the curriculum, there was the pursuit of each child's well-being and happiness. This was reflected in one teacher's explanation that she regarded the children in her class as her own.

### **6.3 Flexible, individualised and formative assessment**

Assessment was, again, mainly formative and aimed at improving children's level of functioning and learning in all areas. The psychologist explained that they actually explicitly use an RTI approach based on three levels of action. In Tier 1, there is a preventive approach, in that:

*... all preschool activities have a universal design and are developed by taking into account the theoretical and scientific inputs obtained through training, sharing of support materials and through joint working meetings.*

At Tier 2, children's skills are screened at two points during the school year, aiming to organise specific activities or additional support measures. For children with more extensive and intensive needs, there is then an individual and interdisciplinary assessment and provision of an IEP and additional support, as specified within the education statutory provisions.

Assessment is mainly based on developmental scales and curriculum-based assessment tools. Generally they do not use psychometric tests; nobody asks about the children's IQ.

At the beginning of each academic year, teachers assess the new pupils. Teachers also explain the pupils' characteristics to the 'new' teacher.

Every year, all children undergo initial and final assessment. There is also 'formative evaluation', based on direct observation, the work done by the pupils and talking with families.

In the interviews with the teachers and support teachers, they indicated that formative evaluations are used from the early years and are based on children's work and formal and informal contact with families. At the end of each term, teachers prepare a written evaluation of each child which is sent to parents. The areas are maths, social, handcrafts, language/communication and knowledge of the world. Parents are happy because it is a positive report on their child's progress. Children have a portfolio of their work.

Competition is regarded as unhealthy and so children are instead encouraged to improve their own knowledge and skills without suffering the stress of competition. Positive reinforcement for appropriate behaviour and effort is seen as an effective way of ensuring children's efforts for self-improvement.

Participants highlighted that the teachers know each child's individual needs. When asked about a child who was playing on his own the whole time the case study visitors were observing the classroom, the teacher explained that she had been concerned about him, had discussed his needs with his parents and had tried to get him to relate to the other children by putting him in a group, although he continued



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to refuse. The teacher mentioned that he had already made good progress, as when he started school in October he was aggressive but now he was no longer bothering the other children; he was currently engaging in tasks at appropriate levels. Thus, the teacher expected that he would be relating to others in a typical way by the end of the year.



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## **7. THEME 4: PROMOTE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY AND COLLABORATION**

As explained in Section 3, the case study visitors regarded shared responsibility and collaboration as the hallmark of the schools' inclusive atmosphere. It was through collaboration that the schools aimed to address the issues of the first three themes, that is, a shared belief in each child's entitlement to and potential for success in life, each child's entitlement to teacher attention and participation in social and learning activities with peers, and each child's entitlement to opportunities to engage actively in learning activities and to make adequate progress.

For description of this Theme 4, please refer to Section 3.



## 8. THEME 5: ENSURE QUALITY PROVISION

### 8.1 'Step by step ... for a greater step'

Quality inclusive provision is ensured in the first place by continuously striving for improvement. This is reflected in the motto adopted by the schools: 'Step by step ... for a greater step.' The school group even saw participation in the IECE project as an opportunity to reflect on how it could further improve services. It was obvious that the school group is constantly searching for new strategies for effectiveness.

### 8.2 Trained staff

In addition to the use of systemic collaboration, these schools make use of other quality improvement structures. For example, they employ qualified staff: all the teachers working in the preschool have at least a bachelor's or master's degree. Several have some previous experience of special education. Within the group of schools, there are special education teachers and a psychologist to support and promote quality inclusive practices. The schools also seek the collaboration of community institutions in health, social and other areas, depending on the children's needs.

The psychologist chooses to devote more time to staff development activities than to assessing individual children. She has created a space for sharing the school vision and for developing skills and strategies that engage all children. In-service training sessions are a regular feature.

The teachers make a real effort to change and improve their practices. The educational and support staff, as well as the school leadership and the psychologist consider continuous training to be very important. They are aware of the need for continuous in-service teacher training and they promote knowledge sharing among staff.

### 8.3 On-going assessment of individual children's progress

The schools follow the RTI model, with an emphasis on the universal level of intervention. While the psychologist in particular was providing teachers with training and intervention support, they were also engaged in assessing each child during the first two months of the year based on observation. Children's progress was thus monitored individually. There were regular assessments of children's progress. Moreover, as the school group is involved in the TEIP programme, it has to account for its good use of resources by documenting improvements in children's achievement.



## 8.4 Reflective practice

A final assurance of quality is reflective practice. Reflection-in-action is a constant process, as teachers have the aim of engaging each child and enabling them to succeed. When there is a barrier, as the teachers stated, and as already mentioned, ‘We try alternative ways if a child does not respond’. However, this reflection-in-action, as well as reflection-for-action and reflection-on-action, takes place regularly through a collaborative process. Thus, as the principal deliberately planned, when teachers meet every two weeks to plan and share strategies, this interaction offers great opportunities for reflection. Similarly, engagement in peer observation of lessons greatly stimulates reflection-in-action. Given the vision of inclusive, active engagement and progress for all children, reflective practice ensures a quality service.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The process of change towards an inclusive education system in Portugal, in the past two decades, has been initiated through adopting new approaches to education and disability based on human rights and equal opportunities. This has gradually led to the closure of special schools and their transformation into resource centres to support all learners and educational staff in mainstream schools, from pre-primary to upper-secondary education.

This change has had an impact on the transformation process of this group of schools, and in particular the ECE classes, by making them accessible to all the children in the community.

However, there was also a particular transformation of this school group towards more inclusive practice through the determination of the local council and education authorities – together with the new principal and all staff – to ensure that all children are given an opportunity to succeed. The shared vision and commitment of the principal, the school psychologist, the educational and support staff, together with the development of the necessary pedagogical material and tools to facilitate and support inclusive practice, have enabled all children to attend ECE classes and engage with their peers in the school activities.

The strong spirit of collaboration, shared decision-making – ‘everybody works together’ – and the focus on solutions rather than problems, on prevention rather than remediation, combined with a bottom-up approach and a strong leadership that promotes the delegation of roles and work have had a positive effect on the children’s progress in the ECE classes, as well as on the development of confidence, self-esteem and well-being among both teachers and learners.

This change has had an impact on all of the stakeholders involved at local level, by contributing to changes in beliefs and attitudes towards diversity, by developing trusting relationships between schools and parents/children, by respecting the right to quality education for all and by promoting the co-ordination of services to increase capacity and efficiency.

The principal explained the schools’ mission as follows:

*We want our students to become responsible citizens, aware of their responsibilities, successful, productive and happy, respecting social, cultural and moral values and differences, turning them into citizens of a wider world.*



## 9.1 Areas for further discussion

As the schools themselves strive to continue improving the services, the visit participants made some proposals for further reflection on key areas related to inclusivity:

- Role of support staff: the support assistants, statutorily assigned to children with SEN, appear to be very much tied to that particular pupil and they consider that they only have to support the child/children with additional needs. More work is needed to clarify the support staff's role in the class and in relation to the teacher and to all the children in the classroom. The class teacher is responsible for all the children and the support assistant can co-operate with the teacher in planning and teaching the programme and supporting all the children in the class. The support assistant can also initiate activities to engage children with peers.
- Co-operation with external local support services: during school hours, some children with communication problems had to visit a local clinic for therapeutic sessions. While the schools try to support the family to achieve this, as a practice aligned with inclusion, it would be preferable to have the local professionals visit the schools and hold the sessions there, as already happens in some instances.
- Alternative communication: alternative communication materials, such as pictograms, could be available and used in all ECE classes to facilitate the children's communication, and not only when there are children with hearing impairments.
- The challenge of provision for children with complex SEN in the ECE classes: further work needs to be done on how this group is included in regular classroom activities and what support and collaboration are necessary.
- All activities in the same room: this can be both advantageous and problematic. There is a large group of children for one teacher and one assistant – however, the structure of activities and the fact that they spend a lot of time in one large room makes it possible to implement educational practices in spite of the large group. Can each child be seen and receive enough attention from the teacher and the assistant in the large groups? Parents questioned the size of the group of children.