Building partnership
with parents
in inclusive ECEC

Two case studies from Portugal



BelaVista
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Two case studies from Portugal

1 Introduction

In the present report, we will present the case study of Portugal, developed as part of the *Be-in* Erasmus+ project: Building partnership with parents in inclusive Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), through a partnership between the *University of Aveiro* (UA) and two ECEC centres, *Bela Vista* and *Shalom*, between May 2022 and February 2025. Our starting point will be the characterisation of the macro-political and social context, where legislative measures and social and educational policies define the conditions of possibility for ECEC action, conditioning the practices of the professionals involved in education, which is intended to be equitable, of quality and inclusive for all children, and especially for children with specific or additional needs and their parents. In order to situate the two ECEC centres, we will briefly refer to the *Municipality of Águeda*, as a local political body with direct responsibility for providing resources for education, which has recently seen its social action competences strengthened, including the provision of Childcare Guarantees. The two ECEC centres will be presented in the terms in which they define themselves as a quality social and educational response and a place for practices that promote the inclusion of children whose specific or additional needs arise from situations of disability or circumstances of special vulnerability to the impact of inequality and discrimination in access to life opportunities.

After presenting the process of the action research common to the two centres, we will describe the process set in motion by each team to involve professionals in processes of self-reflection and experimentation with actions, progressively more focused on the paths and contexts of inclusion of children and parents who face barriers to their participation in ECEC centres. Finally, we will present the challenges that we would like to see recognised and translated by the local authority, the professionals of the two ECEC centres, as well as the parents of the children with special needs, still too often seen as 'others'. We'll illustrate how *Be-In* become an agenda and a factor in mobilising and sustaining the space of the Municipal Meetings, where the professionals were able to experience other roles and forms of collaboration with social stakeholders who are equally involved in guaranteeing the conditions for exercising the right of all children to inclusive care and education from the earliest years of life.

2 Context of the Portuguese action research

2.1 Macro-context: Inclusive ECEC policies in Portugal

In Portugal, access to childcare has been free since 2022, but there is no legal guarantee of places. The childcare centre network is mainly made up of the social and solidarity sector, Private Social Solidarity Institutions (IPSS) or the private sector. Family childcare centres, informal or legalised, are also part of the support network for children aged 0 - 3. Said services are co-financed by Social Security and by parents, according to their income. In 2022, the ECEC network up to the age of three covered 51.3% of children, 76.6% in the private social solidarity sector (GEP/MTSSS, 2024). In the case of children aged 3-6, free access to pre-school education began in 2009 for children aged five. Kindergartens in the social and solidarity sector were integrated into the public Pre-School Education (EPE) network, which currently serves almost the entire pre-school population, under the supervision of the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour and Social Security.

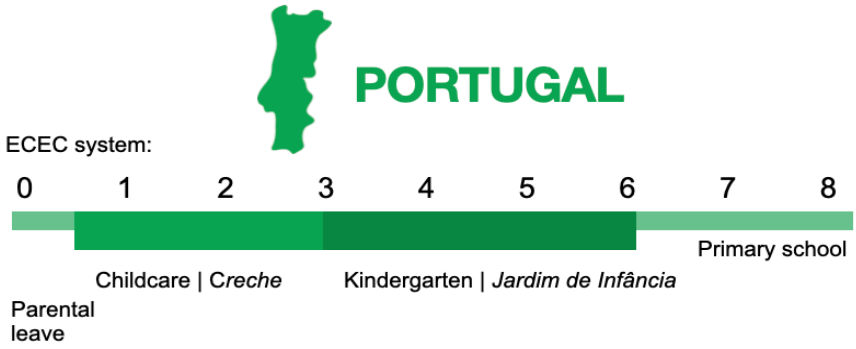


Figure 1. Organisation chart of the education and ECEC system

In 2022, the coverage rate for the EPE network was 81.9% for 3-year-olds, 96.0% for 4-year-olds and 99.8% for 5-year-olds (DGCE, 2023). Also, in the case of EPE, the majority of places are provided by IPSS, which establishes cooperation agreements with Social Security, for the support service provided beyond teaching hours, which is co-funded by Social Security and parents, according to their income.

For the qualifications of ECEC professionals, in Portugal, both for the childcare centres 0-3 and kindergartens 3-6, ECEC teachers have a 2nd cycle qualification, with a master's degree in EPE teaching. In the childcare centres, there is one teacher for two groups of children and one assistant for each group. The ratio is 1:8 for babies and 1:12 for older children. In kindergartens, there is one teacher and one assistant per group of 25 children; the group is reduced to 20 children when it includes children with specific or additional needs.

Since 1997, the EPE network has had Curriculum Guidelines for Pre-School Education[1] and since 2023, childcare centres have Pedagogical Guidelines for Childcare Schools[2], (Marques et al., 2024). The evaluation and monitoring of childcare centres and kindergartens are carried out by two ministries. The organisation of the services is complex: although the system is split, the childcare centres and kindergartens can operate, in some places, in the same space and have the support of the same work team, which allow integrating services for children from 0-6.

Accessibility as a major challenge

It should be noted, however, that in 2021, only about 33% of 0-3 children attend an educational service for at least 30 hours a week. Family income is a key factor that affects access to childcare. According to a study by the *Universidade Nova de Lisboa*, while 67.4% of children from families with low socioeconomic status (low SES, with lower incomes and lower levels of qualification) did not attend childcare centres, the percentage of children from families with high SES, of the same age, who did not attend childcare school was only 50% (Peralta et al., 2022). We can consider that the main issues and challenges facing the centres and the professionals who work there is accessibility for childcare places in the most disadvantaged sectors, aggravated by the lack of information about available places. The realisation of this problem justifies the policy measures taken between 2021 and 2023 to improve children's access to inclusive care and education. Among those measures, we highlight the priority given to children in the National Strategy Against Poverty, the investment in the search for answers by the Local Action Centres, targeted by the National Plan for the Guarantee for Childhood, as well as the inclusion of children benefiting from this benefit in second place on the list of priorities for admission to childcare, alongside children with special needs, who live or whose parents work in the social (Early Years Campaign: first priority, 2023)[3]. It is also worth mentioning the publication of Ministerial Order no. 198/2022, of 27 July[4] which recommends that the admission of these children to childcare school should first be guaranteed through collaboration with local early childhood intervention teams. Those local teams are responsible for meeting the needs of children aged 0 to 6 with established developmental problems, but also children exposed to environmental, psycho-emotional or biological conditions that brings a high probability of risk for their development.

A network to support the inclusion of children with special needs

The multidisciplinary and intersectoral framework of the National Early Intervention System (SNIP)[5] , implies collaboration between professionals from social services, health services and education, in the appropriation of a family-centred approach, in a natural context, which requires partnership with parents. After describing formal and informal family support networks and the needs and priorities, an individualised early intervention plan is duly drawn up, which includes the measures and actions needed to adapt the child's development environments and the measures and initiatives needed to guarantee

[1] https://www.dge.mec.pt/ocepe/

[2] https://www.dge.mec.pt/sites/default/files/opc_marco2024.pdf

[3] https://primeirosanos.com/

[4] https://diariodarepublica.pt/dr/detalhe/portaria/198-2022-186721643

[5] https://snipi.gov.pt/quem-somos#no-back

the complementarity of services and cooperation between all the parties involved. This plan is discussed and signed with and by the parents.

Legislation that accompanies and supports the achievements of the right to inclusive education

The work of those teams is supported by recent laws on inclusion in Portugal, the inclusion of children and young people with special needs has a social basis created by the mobilisation of parents and communities, since 1974, for the achievement of the right to education for all.

Law No. 54/2018, known as the Inclusive Education Law, reflects this aspiration by establishing (i) the abandonment of categorisation systems, including the category of special educational needs and (ii) the abandonment of the special legislation model for special students, creating a continuum of responses for all students, focusing on educational responses, based on universal measures, selective measures and specific measures.

The new Inclusive Education Law now includes the actions of the National Early Intervention System (SNIP), an interministerial system created by Decree-Law No. 281/09, which adopts a family-centred approach and, preferably, in a natural context, by Local Intervention Teams, made up of professionals from social, health and education services. These Teams are responsible for collaborating with the childcare centres in the design and implementation of an Intervention Plan, drawn up with the Parents, which starts from the description of their formal and informal social support networks, needs and priorities, to define the measures and actions necessary to adapt the child's development environment(s) and other measures and initiatives necessary to ensure the complementarity of services and cooperation between the parties involved.

It could be said that legislation in Portugal provides good 'maps' to develop and support inclusive ECEC settings but there is still a need for more 'travellers' to use them and concretise vision into practices accessible for all children and parents, which is aimed with this project.

2.2 Description of the two local pilots

Bela Vista

Bela Vista - Centro de Educação Integrada[6] is an IPSS created by an Association in 1974, on the initiative of parents and professionals who were committed to guaranteeing the unconditional right of children with disabilities to early childhood education and care (ECEC). Since October 1975, *Bela Vista* have been working on the various challenges of inclusive care and education from the earliest years of life, expressed in the motto "the sun, friends and school belong to everyone". Its activities take the form of a kindergarten that is part of the pre-school education network, a leisure activity centre, a childcare centre and a family childcare, where 20% of places are statutorily reserved for "children, families and

[6] https://www.belavista.pt/

groups who, due to any physical, emotional or social deficit, they are in a situation of deprivation and social marginalisation". It also takes the form of a Family Support and Parental Counselling Centre (In Portuguese: *CAFAP*) geared towards parenting issues, working closely with local institutions responsible for guaranteeing children's rights, namely the courts, social security and the Commission for the Protection of Children and Young People (CPCJ), health services and, more recently, as a member of the County Commission for the Guarantee of Childhood, representing the interests of children in the early years. Each of those services arose to meet needs perceived and recognised in direct interaction with the community, from which emerged processes and practices that were consolidated through intersectoral projects. In some cases, collaboration in the creation of new services, which were progressively incorporated by the public and social sectors, ensured the early identification of children whose developmental vulnerability and psychosocial risk of exclusion required additional attention to adverse circumstances such as poverty, immigration, ethnic minority belonging and refuge.

Participation in the *Be-In* Project is part of this commitment to building knowledge about the potential and limits of contexts and practices for including children with specific or additional needs and involving their parents, reconciling equity and inclusion as criteria for quality and guaranteeing the right of all children in Early Childhood Education Centres. *Bela Vista* has the following facilities: Childcare - (39 children aged 0 to 3); Family Childcare - (2 childminders – 8 children aged 0 to 3); Kindergarten (4 classrooms with 22 children, in heterogeneous groups - aged 3 to 6); Free Time Activities Centre/CATL - (80 children aged 6 to 12) and Family Support and Parental Counselling Centre (*CAFAP)* - (39 families with a total of 112 individuals). Its organisational structure includes 1 Technical Director, 6 Kindergarten Teachers, 1 Psychologist, 1 Social Worker, 1 Socio-Cultural Animator, 1 Chartered Accountant, 13 Educational Assistants and 8 other professionals (drivers, cooks and assistants).

Shalom

The *Águeda Shalom Baptist Association* (*Shalom*)[7] is a socially orientated IPSS located in a deprived area 3 kilometres from the city of Águeda. The institution presents itself as a response to "the needs of the local community, being as close as possible to the community" (Initial interview [II] - June/2023). On the social side, Shalom serves needy families through the Social Laundry, the Orthopaedic Bank and the Food Bank, which supports 30 families with support from organisations such as the Food Bank Against Hunger in Aveiro and the Social Security Programme (PCAAC), stating:

> *"We are a small family that we intend to grow, opening up new horizons for more social responses."*
>
> - *Shalom* childcare worker (II - June/2023)

In the educational field, *Shalom* began its activity in 2006 with the creation of the *Shalom Childcare* through the signing of a cooperation agreement with Social Security, which caters for 58 children aged between 3 months and 3 years, making up five groups organised by age. The institution's core mission is to develop excellent work with children in their early years and their families, meeting their needs at all levels, with special concern for those who are in some way marginalised, at risk or in a situation of economic deprivation. The organisation's vision is to be an innovative reference in transmitting values

[7] https://www.abashalom.pt/

and development skills to all the children whose families seek the service. In this context, the institution refers to its ongoing search for a balance between different cultures and social groups, with the intention of enabling them to live with greater dignity in what they consider to be a fairer society, and its aspiration to be recognised for the quality of its community services not only to children, but also to their families, namely by including children and their families from culturally diverse backgrounds, including the Roma ethnic group. With regard to pedagogical action, it mentions the development of a variety of indoor and outdoor activities, and the involvement of parents in educational practice.

Its participation in the Be-In Project as an inclusive educational centre comes from *Shalom's vision on* acceptance and inclusion of all children, equal integration for all, the absence of discrimination against children and families in terms of colour, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, as well as educational practices geared towards outdoor activities and contact with nature from an early age.

As strengths, it can also be mentioned the transport for the children (home-childcare centre) and the digital platform, which was taken on as a means of bringing families closer to the work at the childcare, providing real-time monitoring of the children's routines and activities through the information provided and photos/videos. It points to the challenges of being able to respond to children and their families in a more individualised way and getting closer to families, so that they get involved in class activities and feel safe and confident in the work carried out at the institution. *Shalom* defines diversity as the mixture of people with different cultural backgrounds, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and religion and undertakes inclusion as a way of making people feel they belong. It concludes with the statement that:

"Diversity and Inclusion are related, they are different, but we need both in our world."

- II - June/2023

Shalom operates exclusively as a childcare centre (58 children) and social centre (30 families) in conjunction with the Aveiro Food Bank Against Hunger, and also has clothes bank, a social laundry, as well as an orthopaedic equipment bank. Its organisational structure is made up of: 1 Technical Director/Pedagogical Coordinator; 4 Kindergarten Teachers; 7 Educational Assistants; 1 Administrative Assistant; 1 General Services employee; 2 Kitchen staff (Cook and Cook's Assistant).

3 The action research path and methodology

The case study of Portugal was triggered by a discussion on the problem of including children with specific needs and the partnership with their parents, within the group made up of researchers and representatives of the institutions, with management and pedagogical functions of the two ECEC centres, co-responsible for implementing the *Be-In* Project.

The first two international *Be-In* meetings, which took place in Belgium and Portugal in May and October 2022, were decisive in redirecting the action-reflection path, from which emerged the learning questions that prepared the job shadowing experience and the investment in some changes in the practice contexts of the two ECEC centres. The international intervision meetings and the third meeting held in Iceland in October 2023 also had a significant impact on how the initial learning questions were redefined as part of the problematic targeted by the action research when it came to deconstructing the narrative about inclusion and critically reconstructing the narratives about the inclusive education journey of children with specific or additional needs.



ECEC professionals were challenged to leave the usual places from which they thought about and analysed their own dispositions and the conditions for developing their practices and the positions they took in their relationship with the parents of children with specific or additional needs. The reflection on the parents' position, illustrated in the presentation of Marit's and Abel's cases, prompted the professionals to actively listen to the parents[8].

The technical directors (or ECEC coordinator) of the two teams scheduled the first interviews with the parents and invited all staff at the ECEC centres for focus groups, in which they spoke about inclusion as a culture, policy and practice of the organisation in response to the specific or additional needs of some children and their parents. In the case of *Bela Vista*, meetings were held: (i) with the childcare and kindergarten teachers and assistants in after-work hours and using the World Café method (ii) with the administrative and general services staff, through a group interview. In the case of *Shalom*, this baseline phase was carried out through group interviews with members of the technical team, administrative and general services staff and a member of the board of directors. The possibility of written statements, which could be anonymous, was left open. The two teams were invited to revisit the contexts and

[8] See *Be-In: Catalogue of inspirational resources*, Tool B (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).

practices they considered to be inclusive, with the support of the self-reflection sheet on inclusive pre-school education (AENEEI, 2017[9]) and the sheet on ways of involving families (Unesco, 1996).

The two teams organised a second consultation with parents, where they would pay special attention to the effect of the criteria for choosing participants and the need to adapt the interview script proposed by the project. *Bela Vista* chose to invite parents who represented the diversity of situations that, according to the pedagogical team, implied the need for additional or specific attention to children in the context of learning and participation in the kindergarten or childcare groups. The invited parents represented children's parents and families who faced barriers to learning and participating in the group, who felt difficulties in dealing with the transition and/or adapting to the ECEC Centres. In the case of *Shalom*, the interview script was adapted to the context of a meeting, to which parents and family members of children from the Roma community who had attended the childcare were invited. The meeting was prepared with the presentation of photographs evoking memories of the children's participation in day-care activities, followed by a snack and informal conversations about the reception conditions and the integration of the children and their parents in the activities offered by the EC.

At this stage, the initial perspectives of inclusion portrayed by the participants reported that "*Shalom* is inclusive because of its location" (II - June/2023) justifying that the childcare is inclusive because it "integrates poor children" (II - June/2023), but also "Roma children" (EI - June/2023), and "children with different disabilities" (II - June/2023), or "vulnerable families" (EI - June/2023) as well as "with different cultures and nationalities" (EI - June/2023). Among the reports, it was noted that positions emerged in which "a different look at children with special needs was evident" (Initial interview - June 2023) and that even after the changes brought about by COVID, and despite its challenges, "it remained inclusive" (EI - June/2023).

Reflection on the data collected in this first phase of the process seems to have had no impact on the definition of the learning questions that prepared the job shadowing, experienced in the position of visitors and hosts by the educators and technicians from the partner countries' ECEC centres. Despite recognising the complexity of inclusion as a process that takes place in a context that can be analysed in different dimensions, the professionals continued to invoke inclusion as a common value undertaken by the two ECEC centres, without identifying any barriers to children's learning and participation in activities and interaction with peer groups and adults. It was necessary to involve professionals in problematising the impact of legislative and legal-administrative action, undertaken on a macro-social scale, on organisations and the practices of professionals, on a local scale, in the hope of triggering a debate on the contradiction between the vision of inclusion as a value and as an indicator of quality and fairness that takes into account the right of all children to equality and difference, in educational contexts.

During the development of the *Be-In* action research in the context of *Shalom*, we identified what was most strengthened, as well as the new inclusive practices reflected in it. For the people interviewed, the professional practices that were already being carried out and were enhanced were related to the "new

[9] See *Be-In: Catalogue of inspirational resources*, Tool A (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).

reflections on what it means to include" (Final interviews [FI] - October/2024). Along these lines, there was an improvement in "a more attentive look at children's needs" (FI - October/2024), based on a strong "desire to learn and become more informed" (FI - October/2024), always taking into account each child/family situation and the respective need to "adapt to the realities of parents and children" (FI - October/2024), namely adapting groups and adapting timetables. From these issues, professional attitudes and practices emerged naturally, with a continued "greater reflection on the pedagogical policy of the Shalom childcare" (FI - October/2024).

This problematisation opened up two ways of involving professionals in the production of knowledge: the first way guided by dialogue with stakeholders (national, regional and local) and other bodies and agents in the local community, and the second way based on a distanced and critical revisiting of practices in context, based on the experiences and paths of inclusion of children with specific or additional needs and in partnership with parents. The debate with the professionals was extended to other stakeholders and sectors of the community through the Municipal Meetings, renewing the professionals' interest in the self-reflection tools, now used as self-training resources and of potential interest to other professionals involved in the inclusive education of children.






3.1 Refining the learning questions

During the process of maturing the learning questions underlying each partner's project - *Bela Vista* and *Shalom* - there were not only the reflections of their groups, but also the sharing and interaction with the researchers. During this process, the partners defined their own action-research paths, which we will now characterise.

The specific learning questions for *Bela Vista* were:

(i) How can you facilitate families' access to the specific support they need for their child's development?
(ii) How can we characterise families' levels of trust throughout their relationship with the EC?
(iii) How can parents be more involved in EC meetings, activities and routines?





Shalom's main question for its project was:

- "How can we promote the participatory involvement of families who have children with specific/additional needs in the childcare?"

In addition, the specific questions guiding *Shalom*'s project were:

(i) How can we strengthen the involvement of the families of children with specific/additional needs in the childcare?
(ii) How can the digital platform be mobilised as a resource for communication and promoting the participation of families of children with specific/additional needs and the childcare?
(iii) Is the outdoor space a more favourable context for listening to and involving families who are less familiar with the childcare?





3.2 Implementation and documentation of the action plans

As well as taking part in the meetings of the project's coordinating team, the technical directors of the two ECEC centres organised meetings that involved the professionals in reflecting on the issues of inclusion and relationships with parents that were more difficult to achieve, as well as moments to gather information and update the framework of the data collected. After the project meeting in Iceland in October 2023, the teams' entire operating dynamics reflected their concern with refocusing all planning, experimentation and learning activities on understanding, revisiting and reconstructing the narrative of the inclusion trajectories of children with specific or additional needs and on partnering with these children's parents, bearing in mind the challenges contained in each of the tools shared as part of the *Be-In* Project, namely:

(i) While working with the case of Marit and Abel, which challenges professionals to "take off their shoes" or move away from the position of comfort, to "step into the shoes" of parents who, since the birth of their child with a specific developmental disability or a circumstance of vulnerability that means they need specialised or additional support, are looking, with more or less support, for the best reception conditions, for adequate and personalised care and for inclusive education that guarantees them a sense of belonging to a group of peers and the network of informal and formal relationships that make up the community.
(ii) in the map of the inclusive ECEC ecosystem and the self-reflection sheet that challenge teams to look carefully at their classroom as a micro-context, where they can objectify eight dimensions considered fundamental in creating inclusive environments that are open to partnership with parents.

(iii) While working on *Connecting with Parents*[10], which challenges us to reflect on the conditions that make it possible to better listen to and accept parents' experiences, knowledge and demands for comprehensive and stimulating care, recognising the developmental potential, interests and ways of learning and participating among peers and adults, which the personal and family life of each child makes known in a unique way to parents, as crucial specialists for professionals, dispersed in a network of services and expecting procedures that ensure the effectiveness of professionals.

The *"Voices in Action"* project tools[11] and the use of the childportret tool *"My Profile"*[12], which had less resonance with the teams in the final phase of the project, were revisited in depth and context. To ensure this redirection was prioritised in both the planning and documentation of experimental initiatives, the functioning of the project's coordinating team was restructured. A plan was drawn up with the aim of automatising differentiated spaces for reflection between management and the teaching teams, guaranteeing regular monthly meetings. Meetings to revisit the issue of inclusion, based on the monitoring of practices in the context of action research, now include the entire teaching team from the two centres and the researchers. The purpose of the meetings was to reintroduce the project's theoretical framework (on Inclusion and Partnership with parents), focusing on the circumstances in which the children flagged as "cases of inclusion" were placed and the relationship with their parents, while at the same time reinforcing opportunities for direct interaction with and between the professionals from the two ECEC; in this context, the researchers visited groups of children and parents' meetings at the two centres in order to highlight the practices and records of direct observation, listening, visual documentation and dialogue about practices in the context and, more specifically, in the contexts of learning and participation of children flagged as special cases and situations of direct interaction between parents and professionals. Short videos were made and returned to each professional as a means of distancing and investing in the use of occasional observation recording techniques as documents of inclusion and partnership processes. Those regular monthly meetings with the ECEC professionals and technical directors of the institutions were aimed at alternating roles and strengthening the professionals' debating dispositions, with a view to training a possible researcher and monitoring and analysing the practices that were being documented as experimental actions, with the focus being on them:

(i) the interactions observed between children, between children and adults, among adults in the group and team members.
(ii) changes in the context and narratives about trying to signal and remove barriers to the learning and participation of children with specific needs and formal and informal communication and partnership building with their parents in the day-to-day running of the childcare. In addition to these meetings with the pedagogical team, specific moments were created for training the assistants and other members of the team on the themes and tools of *Be-In*.

[10] See *Connecting with parents* (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).
[11] See *Be-In: Catalogue of inspirational resources*, Reference A (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).
[12] See *Be-In: Catalogue of inspirational resources*, Tool F (www.vbjk.be/en/project/be-in).





3.3 Analysis and conclusion phase

This report was thus produced in collaboration with the two ECEC centres, thus enabling an in-depth reflection on the experiences undergone throughout the project and subjectively characterised in the final interviews. This methodological approach facilitated the identification of the project's impact on professional development and the cultivation of inclusive organisational cultures, as well as the enhancement of family participation.

4 The case study from *Bela Vista*

4.1 Their learning questions and action plan

From their learning questions, they developed an action plan:

(i) How can you facilitate families' access to the specific support they need for their child's development?
(ii) How can we characterise families' levels of trust throughout their relationship with the EC?
(iii) How can parents be more involved in EC meetings, activities and routines?

The project's operationalisation methods include:

- Meetings with the parents of children with special needs on development and inclusion;
- Meetings with specialised technicians/health professionals to build bridges with parents;
- Intentionally define communication strategies to increase educator/child, educator/parent, child/child, child/parent communication;
- Meetings with parents focused on the children's individual inclusion/integration process;
- Invitations to parents to spend the first 3 days of integration with their children;
- Identifying with the parents their expectations for the children;
- Welcoming parents on the third day of the school year;
- Organising spaces to promote greater child involvement, engagement and creativity;
- Inviting parents to take part in activities with the children.

4.2 Highlights and observed changes

> *"I learnt how important it is and mandatory to listen to parents, to be able to see what is behind each child, family, story."*
>
> - ECEC professional, *Bela Vista* (FI - October/2024)

Be-In was in *Bela Vista* a process a deep questioning pedagogical practices themselves. While reflecting first about inclusion issues, it brought the reflection every time further, to touch almost everything being done in the centre.

> *"To stop a moment and be aware that many times I have been judgmental: The mother doesn't call, isn't working and doesn't come to pick up the child, or arrives so late....], the importance of seeing the whole story"*
>
> - ECEC professional, *Bela Vista* (FI - October/2024)

Concretely, many professionals have mentioned how the *Connecting with Parents* tool has helped them communicate with parents and prepare for meetings.

> *The Connecting Parents helped me prepare for meetings, how I should talk to them. I realised that I shouldn't bring anything to the meeting that could create a barrier to communication (computer, papers, chair positioning, etc.)*
>
> - ECEC professional, *Bela Vista* (FI - October/2024)

About a specific case, a professional emphasises how she felt the interactions with the family when she says: "Having M's mother in the integration process was very powerful. The mother taught me a lot; she was like a work mentor and showed us how to look after M." (FI - October/2024)[13]. The development of *Be-In* has fostered the aggregation of perspectives that point to "greater involvement with children" (FI - October/2024), the "reinforcement of good practices" (FI - October/2024), the emphasis on the "importance of self-reflection" (FI - October/2024), the investment in "communication and dialogue" (FI - October/2024), greater "attention to children's specific needs" (FI - October/2024), "strengthening the relationship with parents" (FI - October/2024), as well as "welcoming" (FI - October/2024) both children and their families and the premise that they were already putting into practice the guidelines for inclusion highlighted by *Be-In*. As an example:

> *"In fact there was emotion here. And we realised that the mother was on board when L. held a work meeting at Carnival, a meeting of parents to do things, and this mother turns up. And she is, just as S.'s mother also turns up, only she's from Kazakhstan, and suddenly you see people helping each other"*
>
> - ECEC professional, *Bela Vista* (FI - October/2024)

With regard to the new practices for inclusion reflected by *Be-In*, the contributions relating to a "greater involvement of families" (FI - October/2024)[14] in the institution's activities and in the day-to-day life of

[13] Reception activities through "smooth transition" between rooms - July 2024

[14] Breakfast with Parents" activities - March 2023

the *Bela Vista* ECEC, in which they were even more involved in person, conjecturing the "inclusion of families" (FI - October/2024)[15] and not just children in the educational institution by adopting practices that focus more on "attention centred on the needs of families" (FI - October/2024), in order to gently prepare parents and place them as stakeholders, encompassing practices with intentionality. To illustrate that, the participants indicated the "insertion of parents in the adaptation of children" (FI - October/2024)[16], by creating the space for the active (and face-to-face) participation of families in the adaptation of children at the beginning of the year. Among the content analysed, "more dialogue / more sharing" (FI - October/2024) between professionals and between the childcare and families also stands out. Greater encouragement for "training" (FI - October/2024), "mutual help on the part of the professionals" (FI - October/2024), including "more sharing between educators and assistants" (FI - October/2024). More carefully, we can highlight the voices of educators who say: "Another change has to do with families. Families are much more present" (FI - October/2024)[17] or even more assertively:

> *"Also because over time we've done at least two exercises to look inside our groups and realise how we communicate. Realising that the way we all communicated with parents was... It wasn't just assertive, but communication really wasn't enough. I remember at the time, in the childcare centre, L. realised that there were some parents who read everything, but didn't understand anything they were reading. So, she realised that everything had to be done orally, had to be explained orally to the parents. So, from then on, all the communication that took place was always oral and, in this case, face-to-face."*
>
> - FI - October/2024

In Bela Vista they also took a look on the familiarisation period and its processes:

> *"Just as I think it was very important for the parents at the childcare centre, for the children who came in for the first time, to be able to spend three days in the space with their child and get to know the child's routines, but to know that they were teaching the staff how to deal with their child. I think it was a moment when, on the one hand, both the staff and the parents realised the weaknesses we all have, because their responsibilities are placed on them, and although some parents felt very comfortable, there were also parents and staff who didn't feel so comfortable, but they were able to talk about it."*
>
> - FI - October/2024

It made her much more connected to small actions that, despite being small, can be significant in the relationship with families "For example, in the room I'm in, we have photographs of the family. I think that's a cosy way of making them feel good" (FI - October/2024).

[15] Meetings to share parents' testimonies about the children's transition process - July 2024

[16] Welcoming activities through participatory adaptation of parents - September 2023 and October 2024

[17] Activities to welcome families by the Pedagogical Director and President of the Board at the opening of the year - September 2023

At the same time, it is important to highlight the educational role and the stimulus to reflection for professionals and organisations, which the job shadowing activities enabled[18] both as visitors and as those visited by other professionals. For the institution and the school community, the Be-In's contributions were highlighted as "sharing the job shadowing", contributing to "greater team involvement" and a space that fostered "more reflections on inclusion" and "integration between the childcare and the community" (FI - October/2024).






[18] Job shadowing activities - Visit by Belavista professionals to Reikjyavic (Iceland - April 2023) and reception by professionals from Ghent (Belgium - May 2023)

5 The case study from *Shalom*

5.1 Their learning questions and action plan

"How can we promote the participatory involvement of families who have children with specific/additional needs in the childcare?"

This general learning question and the specific questions guided *Shalom*'s action plan:

(i) How can we strengthen the involvement of the families of children with specific/additional needs in the childcare?
(ii) How can the digital platform be mobilised as a resource for communication and promoting the participation of families of children with specific/additional needs and the childcare?
(iii) Is the outdoor space a more favourable context for listening to and involving families who are less familiar with the childcare?

The ways of operationalising the project, in their action plan, were:

- Creation of a group of mothers/women consultants who share experiences and concerns about their children;
- Inviting the children's families to welcome them, to be present in the classrooms and routines for as long as they feel necessary;
- Meeting with families about the children's development, expectations, concerns and doubts;
- Appeal for families to take part in activities/events with their children;
- Support for families in using the EC's digital platform;
- Meetings with parents/classrooms to reflect on and discuss the benefits and constraints of the digital platform;
- Take photos or videos of your children's achievements at home and share them on the digital platform;
- A meeting of mothers of children with specific/additional needs to collaborate in moments of reflection on how young children learn in different contexts and moments of everyday life;
- Production of a photographic album by the mothers in which the children's learning through play is portrayed.





5.2 Highlights and observed changes

Among the new inclusion practices that were made possible by participating in *Be-In*, there were those that involved families, whether in "welcoming them" (FI - October/2024) to the childcare, "practices to promote communication with parents" (FI - October/2024), or in "restructuring the reception programme to adapt it to the children in the childcare"[19]. This last one was reflected in the need to "change the start dates of the school year" (FI - October/2024) (to extend the dates and practices of reception in small groups in order to be more individualised), "adapting the groups and timetables of some children" (changing the groups and timetables of some children / placement in smaller groups / changes to meal times) in favour of "more personalised and inclusive transitions" (FI - October/2024) with prior meetings with parents, prior presentation of the new teacher , in a sense of more intentional communication.

> *"The turning point and the entry of the Be-In, particularly for the institution, was from the moment the job shadowing took place. We really felt that."*
>
> - II - A - Shalom

The team was "involved in BE-in" (information and sharing sessions about the project and international experiences. Presentation of good practices and ideas for implementation in the childcare) and in this way, there was an "incentive for more collaborative work between the childcare team" (FI - October/2024), with moments of "reflection that they can do more and better" (FI - October/2024), where they sought a "closer look at inclusion" (FI - October/2024), with "practices designed for children" that pointed out the need for greater "structural and material accessibility" (FI - October/2024) in the classrooms and in the childcare in general. Among the new practices, it was possible to see reports of "sharing practices between different countries and contexts" (FI - October/2024)[20] , as well as an increase in the "integration network with public and private institutions in the region" (FI - October/2024).

In terms of greater parental involvement, we would highlight their participation in joint activities linked to *Shalom*, such as organising a seminar[21] or organising children's activities with their parents in outdoor spaces[22] , as well as structuring an alternative way for parents to participate in digital platforms[23]. As a result of those activities, a document was duly produced recording the images[24]. We would also emphasise that holding meetings has encouraged families from the same group of children to get to know each other and share experiences/concerns - strengthening relationships between parents[25]. On the other hand, families became more involved in the Centre through different activities (e.g. outdoor

[19] Welcome activities at Shalom (new children) - September 2023

[20] Job shadowing activities - Visit of Shalom professionals in Ghent (Belgium - April 2023) and reception of professionals from Reykjavik (Iceland) at Shalom (May 2023).

[21] Seminar "Playing outdoors - the potential and constraints of outdoor spaces", Dionísio Pinheiro Foundation (Águeda) with the participation of dozens of education professionals and several guests - 20 April 2024.

[22] Meeting with Families in Shalom's outdoor spaces - 16 and 23 March 2024.

[23] Involvement of Parents in WhatsApp Groups to exchange opinions and photographic records - March/April 2024

[24] Photo album built from the parents' selection with photos of activities outside (4 photos) and in other spaces (2) - 16, 17 and 18 April 2024

[25] Creation of a Parent-Partner Group - May 2021

activities, building a photo album, organising the Christmas party, ...) intentionally for parents and with parents. In terms of communication, it was more frequent and complemented through the functionalities of the digital platform - *ChildDiary*[26] - with personal and informal conversations with families, promoting greater accessibility for families. The opportunities for the dissemination of information regarding each child, their quotidian routines, their well-being, their learning and achievements are manifold. The utilisation of visual media, such as images and videos, shared by and with the families in each classroom setting, is a crucial aspect of this endeavour.





[26] https://childdiary.net/pt/

6 Discussion: how did those changes happen?

6.1 Challenges and success factors

The changes identified were in terms of personal beliefs and perspectives on inclusion, through a new perspective on children's needs and consequent individual and group reflection on pedagogical practices in ECEC centres.

> *"Be-In has made us reflect on our practices, those that are behind us, what we're doing now and what we can do in the future, hasn't it? At least it made me question a lot of things"*
>
> - M. (FI - October/2024)

In addition, there is a stronger awareness in the desire to learn and reflect on the diversification of pedagogical processes and, in particular, the participation of parents, as stated here:

> *"Yes, reflection was something that came to us, which was something we realised we didn't do that much. Reflection enriched us because we began to realise why we do it, how we do it and in what way, right? And by being very critical of what we do and with the input that Be-In has brought us, so that we can then improve our actions. Of course, change is always a moment of resistance, but I think there was a lot of openness on the part of the team, in the sense of working towards the final goal."*
>
> - - FI - October/202

In terms of the centres' practices, there have been new inclusion practices resulting from this project, mainly in terms of welcoming families, adapting childcare/adaptation practices, pedagogical practices that are more child-oriented, encouraging more collaborative work within the team of professionals, practices to intensify communication with parents, and personalised transitions in the children's lives. The testimony of one professional stands out when she says: "Parents spending 3 days with their child in the childcare helps us to know how to deal with them and create bonds with the family" or "Having S's mother in the integration/inclusion process was powerful. The mother taught me a lot. She was a guide in the work and care we had to do with M" (FI - October/2024).

The factors that we can associate with stimulating these changes are:

- job shadowing activities;
- individual and group reflection practices;
- sharing of practices between professionals from different countries;
- adaptations of practices in childcare/adaptation activities;

- participation in Municipal Meetings with professionals from various institutions and areas[27][28][29] ;
- broadening of those themes in the centres. In one of the ECEC centres, it was possible to identify processes of widespread involvement of professionals, for instance, when stating:

> *"Okay, at first Be-In was very much 'L.'s thing, isn't it'? It was very much my thing. Then, when T. went to Belgium with me, it became more a thing for both of us. It's like I say, when we come back from Belgium and we meet with the team and show them the photographs, T. and I sit down and propose involving the team as well. So what do we do? The two of us, at lunchtime, one at lunchtime and the other at a different time, to catch up with the group of assistants at the two different lunchtimes, what did we do? We started talking a lot about family participation. And we started, I wouldn't say training, but we talked about it, we presented them with texts, we got the team thinking about what family participation should be like, how we could bring families into the institution, how we could welcome families differently, what view we had of children who were different, right? Who were the different children, what needs did these children have and what did we do to meet these needs, right? So, at lunchtimes, we managed to….And that their opinion also mattered and was also important. And ultimately this was also a learning experience for them. It was for them and for us, because we were all learning together, weren't we?"*
>
> - ECEC coordinator *Shalom* (FI - October/2024)





There was a complementarity of contexts and forms of empowerment for professionals arising from the complementarity of regular partner meetings, municipal meetings, as well as daily interactions with children and parents to "enhance critical self-reflection on the vision and contradictions between the vision of inclusion and practice in the context of inclusion and relationships with parents" (Portugal Team, 2024). In parallel, there were also processes that allowed professionals to empower their voice in debates with local stakeholders and professional peers about inclusive care and education, as children's rights in the community (Portugal Team, 2024). It's crucial to clarify that all the individual and group processes in each partner (meetings, reflections, self-reflections, reflective records) took place at the same time as daily professional practice where new approaches were applied. That allowed one educator to state "I learnt how important it is and obligatory to listen to parents, to be able to see what's

[27] Town Hall Meeting - Towards an Agenda for Babies and Young Children - 23 May/2023

[28] II Municipal Meeting - Integrating services: Building paths in dialogue - 31 January/2024

[29] III Municipal Meeting - Where are the babies who are still deprived of access to a care and education system?

behind each child, family, story" (FI - October/2024), even mentioning that "Stop and be aware that many times I was judgmental: The mother doesn't call, isn't working and doesn't come to pick up the child, or arrives so late....], the importance of seeing the whole story" (FI - October/2024).





As another professional points out, "I went to look for this family because *Be-In* made me think" (FI - October/2024) in a professional working environment characterised as being different and more positive, feeling "in the team - more availability, more attention, more empathy" (FI - October/2024), while at the same time the fact that an environment was created in which "the most important activity was sharing" (FI - October/2024) and in which professionals communicated more assertively with each other on a day-to-day basis is considered to be more relevant, as one educator identifies when she says, "We talk more - with empathy" (FI - October/2024). Finally, the organisation of the Multiplier Event[30] with the differentiated participation of all the participants, made it possible to reaffirm the gains in professional development, organisational cultures and impacts on local and regional policies, shared at the same time with dozens of professionals and institutions in the field of childhood. As was emphasised at the end:

> *"I think it's also a good example set by Be-In, which is that we can't do all this without having good references. There are already instruments, tools that help us do what we think we can't do. And Be-in provides some very useful and flexible tools that can be contextualised. No instrument or tool is good in itself for all contexts. But if it is theoretically well founded, it will have the plasticity to serve us regardless of the context. And we've seen here in the testimonies from Bela Vista and Shalom that each one has to use its own identity, its own history, to find the right way to use these tools and to improve and increase them, and to do so in a participatory way. So this is possible, and Be-In has showcased and proved it well."*
>
> - Stakeholder (Multiplier Event, February/2025)






[30] Multiplier Event - Crossing views on the (unfinished) journey and legacy of the Be In towards the inclusion of Children with special needs project, 30 January 2025 - Centro de Artes de Águeda.

6.2 Towards sustainability

Looking to the future, based on the *Be-In* experience, we believe that the foundations have been laid for an organisational culture in the two partners of reflection and questioning about the processes of including children with specific needs and the active involvement of families. The two centres will have practices and procedures for inclusion in the different phases of the relationship with families, which could be sustained in the future. We believe that the relationships between professionals will be more optimised in terms of the organisation's more global response to the challenges of including children and the different dynamics of family participation. The structural dimension of all of this is a spirit of sharing and exchanging educational experiences and pedagogical knowledge between professionals that nourishes the quality of educational processes. The community will remain reflective about the processes of inclusion of children and their families according to the diversity of contexts and dynamics in the various IPSSs working in the area. The fact that it was possible to mobilise professionals and agents with responsibilities for defining local and regional policies made it possible to look at the challenges of these issues in a different way.

In terms of local public policy, the mobilisation of Águeda Town Council towards said challenges has been demonstrated, not only by its participation in public activities - Municipal Meetings - but above all in the formalisation of a structure focused on the development of the Child Guarantee in the municipality. The possibility of maintaining Municipal Meetings involving IPSS and educators and technicians linked to early years education, with a continuing agenda on inclusion and family participation, will be an important step. As was mentioned in the form of a challenge at the Multiplier Event held.

> *"And here I'd like to challenge you to ensure that the Forum, as an instrument born out of these relational processes of work and the desire to work together, doesn't disappear. Today we are here in a space that is more unidirectional, that's not how we were in our moments, but it also has to do with formats that don't contradict wills. Today we have chosen to be here together at this moment, but whether or not we want to continue this space for building, learning, commitment, as well as social transformation in Fórum, in Águeda, with the ability to question and share experiences, not only successes but also failures."*
>
> - Stakeholder (Multiplier Event, February/2025)

Thinking about the future and the next steps presuppose designing ways to promote forms and processes of sharing between professionals in a territory with specific problems and that justifies continuing, as described:

> *" It was a way for us to reach out and to create proximity with the other IPSS. We clearly realise that the realities are the same, the problems are the same, the challenges are the same.Everyone faces the same problems, has the same obstacles. Some institutions are bigger, others are smaller, some obstacles are bigger than others, but at the end of the day, it's all the same. And our difficulties in reaching out are often the same. So the fact of having them close to us and creating this network and being able to have this connection, I think that was one of the most beneficial things that Be-In brought and it was really spectacular."*
>
> - FI - October/2024).

7 Conclusion

At the end of the *Be-In* project's development, we can conclude that they are complementary on several levels. The most obvious impacts were not only on the individuals, but also on the ECs and the community. During the Be-In project, there were modifications or changes to the project's objectives in different ways and at different times.

In the **Community of Águeda**, it was possible to create a political agenda centred on the issues of inclusion and the participation of families in the life of ECs, mobilising dozens of professionals and political leaders with an emphasis on these issues. This emphasised a greater interest on the part of local stakeholders (e.g. Águeda Town Council) in building inclusion solutions in a plural and diverse territory. Of particular note here is the creation of the Children's Guarantee organisational structure at Águeda Town Hall.

In the **project's partner organisations,** in terms of organisational culture, there is now a different way of looking at and questioning individuals and education professionals about the challenges of including children with specific needs and involving families. It was evident throughout the Be in project that its objectives had an impact at different times and in different ways. Communication between educational centres/professionals and families should be maximised by complementing forms and processes, where formal meetings should not be the exclusive form of family involvement. Formality intertwined with informality, the written record reinforced with images (photo or video), as well as the personal contact with the use of digital platforms. With a very clear educational aim of strengthening the bond and participation of families in the life of educational centres.

In terms of the **professionals**, there has been a stimulus to their professional development, in which self-reflection on how they operationalise inclusion has allowed them to gain greater reflective depth on the whole of their professional practice. There was a clear realisation that the concept of including children with specific needs requires individual and personalised approaches. In terms of communication skills with parents, the notion that it is important to master the different forms of operationalisation, emphasising complementarity (face-to-face/distance/written/platforms). Using different tools and strategies, the professionals identified a clear evolution in their thinking and teaching practices.

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9 Appendices

Action plan from *Bela Vista*

	Machine Translated by Google Learning questions and actions	Objectives	Indicators	Who leads? (Who else this	Calendar
1	Question 1: How to facilitate families' access to specific support necessary for the child's development				
1.1	Meet with parents of children with SEN to talk about development, about concerns, about what more can be done for development, for inclusion....	To make our concerns known and indicate paths, common strategies that contribute to enhancing the best of each referral to support child. Speak truthfully in the interests of specific? child	number of meetings with parents to	Educators	whenever necessary
1.2	Meet with specialized technicians/healthcare professionals to build bridges with parents	Facilitate the process and help to understand the family	number of meetings/contacts with specialized technicians? number of children forwarded/supported?	educators	whenever necessary
1.3	Intentionally use communication strategies to increase communication child educator, child/child parent educator, - child/parent	Ensure the family understands what we want to communicate and support the child with SEN in their communication process and in reading daily routines	What? How? With whom and for whom?	Educators and auxiliaries	continuous
2	**Question 2: How to characterize the levels of trust of families throughout their relationship with the Center?**	**objectives**	Indicators	Who leads?	Calendar
2.1	Meet with parents to prepare individually the process of inclusion/integration of the child	increase confidence levels and parental safety.	parents' perception of how meeting contributed to their levels of trust and security?	educators	Sep 23 and Sep 24
2.2	Reanalyzing the Abel case	Identify what we have changed in our narrative	The narrative/reflection 2	Educators	Feb/24
2.3	Invite parents to spend the first 3 days of integration with your child (contribute to question no. 3)	contribute to the knowledge of Center routines, for trust and safety of families and technicians and for a better understanding of and in way of caring for that child, by the Center's technicians	No. of parents who felt comfortable and validated this process.Parents' narrative about the process. Was everyone comfortable? What would they change? What would they do differently?	Educators	Sep 23 and Sep 24
2.4	Identify with the parents their expectations for the child	technicians and parents aware of the child's progress/development	parents' perception of how this process contributed to increasing their levels of trust in the Center?	Educators	Sep 23 and Sep 24
3	**Question 3: How to involve parents more in the Center's meetings, activities, and routines**	**objectives**	Indicators	Who leads?	Calendar
3.1	Welcoming parents on the first 3 days of the start of the school year	Bring management closer to parents and create a feeling of welcome and well-being welcome to the Center	narrative of families about the experience. Understand how the family felt, what is the feeling/emotion developed?	Director Technique and Direction	Sep 23 and Sep 24
3.2	Organize spaces to promote greater involvement, engagement and child's creativity	The rooms have more space for the child can explore and can be involved, leading her to become more involved.	See the levels of implication and well-being of children in classroom routines/activities, hear what they say about?	Educators and auxiliaries	whenever necessary
3.3	Invite parents to participate in activities with children	Increase the number of families present in our activities/routines	attendance record and photos of parental participation?	Educators, auxiliaries, technical director	along +A6 L17of the year

Action plan from *Shalom*

How can we promote the participatory involvement of families who have children with specific/additional needs in the childcare?					
Learning questions/objectives and actions		Objectives	Possible indicators	Who leads? (Who else involved?)	Timing
1	How can we strengthen the involvement of the families of children with specific/additional needs in the childcare?				
	Creation of a group of mothers/women consultants who share experiences and concerns about their children.	-Reinforcing and resuming visits to Roma neighbourhoods -Awareness-raising action to open a dialogue about children -Promote participation/sharing in meetings and the life of the childcare	No. of visits to neighbourhoods - Awareness-raising content - Overview of the content of records	Educators Auxiliary personnel Mothers/women consultants	February to May 2024
	Invite the children's families to welcome them, to be present in the classrooms and routines for as long as they feel necessary.	- Rethinking childcare in the presence of parents in order to consolidate bonds that allow them to feel calm, safe, confident, ...	- Brief records from the parents about those days (how they felt, how they coped with new routines, what doubts arose, how they clarified them, ...)	- Educators - Auxiliary personnel - Parents	The whole school year
	Meet with families to talk about children's development, encouraging them to express their own concerns, share doubts and ask questions	-Clear up doubts, raise concerns, propose strategies to overcome barriers, provide support and share achievements and obstacles overcome	- No. of meetings - Brief records of topics covered	- Educators -Health Professionals / Intervention Teams (if applicable) - Parents	November 2023 to June 2024
	Encourage families to take part in activities/events with their children	- Promote participation through: -challenges for home work -attendance at class activities -organising events	Record of type of activity vs. number of participants	- Educators - Auxiliary personnel - Parents	November to June 2024
2	How can the digital platform be mobilised as a resource for communication and promoting the participation of families of children with specific/additional needs and the childcare?				
	Support families who show interest/need/difficulties in using the digital platform	- Give a brief demonstration of how to use and access data on the platform	- Recording and briefly summarising the difficulties/doubts	- Administration	The whole school year

			experienced by families		
	Meeting with parents from each classroom to reflect on and discuss the benefits and constraints of the digital platform	Identify perceived benefits and constraints	- Register of benefits - Register of constraints	- Educators - Auxiliary personnel Filipa, Salomé, Fernanda, Nubimar - Parents	23 February 2024 01 March 2024
	Invite parents to make records (photo or video) of their children's achievements at home and share them on the digital platform.	Encourage parents to share and reflect on the stage/process of their children's development over time	No. of records shared Brief analysis of shared content	Parents Educators	November 2023 to May 2024
3	Is the outdoor space a more favourable context for listening to and involving families who are less familiar with the childcare?				
	A meeting of mothers of children with specific/additional needs to collaborate in moments of reflection on how young children learn in different contexts and moments of everyday life.	-Promote participation/sharing in meetings and the life of the childcare Making mothers aware that play is learning Promoting reflection on play at home and play outside the childcare.	Overview of the content of records Photo content Records and contacts between mothers and professionals Analysing narratives	Educators Auxiliary personnel Administrative Mothers/women consultants	16 March 2024 23 March 2024 6 April 2024 Seminar 20 April 2024
	Creation of a photographic album by the mothers in which the children's learning through play is portrayed				