

PARTNER SEARCH: HORIZON-CL2-2026-01-TRANSFO-03: Tackling child poverty and ensuring disadvantaged children's access to Early Childhood Education and Care

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The Research Centre Pedagogy in Practice at the KdG University of Applied Sciences and Arts in Belgium, Antwerp is seeking to join a consortium for the HORIZON call *Tackling child poverty and ensuring disadvantaged children's access to Early Childhood Education and Care*.

Context

Over the past years, Pedagogy in Practice has worked extensively on the inclusion of vulnerable groups in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC). Our research projects have explored multiple dimensions of the participation gap, including accessibility and flexibility of ECEC services, professionals' communication and outreach towards parents, intercultural awareness and participatory decision-making processes.

In Belgium, ECEC is organized in a split system whereby childcare (0-3) and preschool (2,5-6) are governed by different Ministries (i.e. a divide between care and education) within different Communities. Close to all children (98%) between the age of three and five attend preschool, whereas participation from the age of 5 recently became mandatory. Childcare participation rates for under-threes, however, showed the second largest participation gap in the EU in 2024. According to Eurostat, under-threes who are not at risk of poverty or social exclusion are three times more likely to participate in formal childcare (59.3%) than those who are at risk (20.1%). This contrast makes Belgium an interesting case to study and develop effective strategies to support disadvantaged children's access to ECEC.

With respect to this call the centre would like to contribute primarily to practice-oriented aspects of the project by:

- investigating barriers preventing disadvantaged children from accessing ECEC;
- testing and evaluating innovative methods in real-life settings;
- developing evidence-based and operational policy advice, including good practices to close the ECEC participation gap;
- addressing scalability of these practices;

Research Centre

Pedagogy in Practice conducts practice-oriented research for and with professionals working with children up to 16 years of age.

Following competences are relevant to the calls:

- Extensive experience with practice-oriented research for stakeholders in the field of Early Childhood Education and Care.
- Strong networks in local organisations working with disadvantaged children and families, who are willing to participate in pilots and action research.
- Extensive experience in mixed-methods research, including experiential research with children, action research with parents and ECEC professionals, evaluation research, research by design, as well as narratological analysis.
- Experience in developing hands-on tools, such as a practical guide on how to introduce Education for Sustainability in Early Childhood Centres, a tool to reflect on childcare's cooperation possibilities with families, a playful method to discuss intercultural awareness.
- Experience with creating digital learning platforms such as a narrative website linking the experiences of refugee children to inspirational materials for professionals, webinars about parental involvement and interactional possibilities with infants and babies.

Data gathering and analysis: The centre uses a variety of participatory methods to gather and analyse data and strives to involve research participants, respecting their agency. Researchers often include participants during data gathering (practitioners co-interview parents, organise focus groups with parents and employ pedagogic documentation; children engage in conversation through photo-voice, photo-elicitation, arts-based inquiry, ...) and experiment with co-analysis possibilities. At the heart of these methods lies the question how complex matters can be made more tangible for all participants.

Results: The centre's research results range from action frameworks over policy recommendations and practical guides and toolboxes addressing certain topics in a variety of childcare environments.

The centre has been and is involved in several EU projects:

Two social innovation projects in the Interreg 2seas Programme: PACE (Providing Access to Childcare and Employment) and VRAC (It takes a Village to Raise A Child), several Erasmus + projects (ProChill on training practitioners for childcare; the Value+ project on the principle of Educare), the AMIF-project MUST-a-LAB (Multi-Stakeholder labs for migrants and stakeholders) and the CERV project GOTALK on children's councils in schools.

The centre is also presiding the national OMEP committee.

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