

Social Research Call

Title:

Causal Effects of Executive Function Training in Early Childhood



Acronym: EXECUT

Project leader: María Hernández de Benito

Host organisation: CUNEF Universidad

Main purpose of the project: To provide the first rigorous causal evidence on whether stimulating executive functions in early childhood improves children's cognitive, emotional, and social development in Spain. To do so, the project evaluates a scalable, teacher-delivered curriculum (Educar para Ser) that embeds executive-function training into everyday classroom routines for children, without increasing curricular demands.

Design/methodology/approach: A cluster randomized controlled trial in schools in the Región de Murcia. Schools are randomly assigned to teacher training, teacher plus parental training, or control. Executive functioning is rated by teachers and parents at baseline, and several follow-ups, complemented by academic and behavioral measures and direct specialist assessments.

Potential results: The first experimental estimates of an integrated, teacher-delivered executive-function curriculum in Spain: effects on executive functioning at school and home, early literacy and numeracy, and classroom behavior; the added value of parental training; persistence; and spillovers to classmates with intellectual disabilities. It will also produce a new longitudinal dataset and implementation guidelines for schools.

Social relevance of the research: Spain has among the highest rates of early school leaving and child poverty in the EU, and poverty-related gaps in executive functioning emerge by age 4 and widen over time. By strengthening these skills through a low-cost, scalable curriculum delivered by regular teachers—explicitly including students with special educational needs—the project targets educational quality, equal opportunity, and inclusion.

Originality/value of the project: The first experimental evaluation of an integrated, Spanish-language executive-function curriculum. It experimentally varies parental involvement, retains students with special educational needs, and measures direct and spillover effects. Its scale and policy partnership position the findings for scale-up.