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REVIEW

A systematic review of interventions promoting social inclusion of immigrant and ethnic minority preschool children

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this review was to systematically examine interventions in preschools that promote social inclusion of children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. This systematic review was performed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement. By a comprehensive literature search of relevant peer-reviewed articles in three databases, seven studies were selected as eligible in line with the a priori defined inclusion criteria. Data across included studies were synthesised using thematic analysis. Four prominent themes emerged from the studies: (a) a strength-based approach, not a deficit-based one; (b) involvement of family and the larger community; (c) importance of cultural brokerage; and (d) importance of intergroup contact to reduce prejudice, discrimination and improve social relations. The review highlights the paucity of interventions that promote the social inclusion of immigrant and ethnic background children in preschools. It also suggests that parent and community-based interventions can positively increase social inclusion amongst immigrant and native children. Additional well-designed interventions are needed to better understand and identify effective interventions targeting social inclusion of preschool-age children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.

The aim of this review is to extract and synthesise the literature on the interventions in preschools aiming to foster social inclusion of children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds.[1] According to UN Population Division estimates, 3.4% of the world's population consist of immigrants as of 2017 (United Nations 2017). The ethnic composition of countries worldwide has also been continuously changing as a result of immigration and emigration patterns (Nishina et al. 2019). Societies have experienced a demographic shift and cultural diversity through increasing mobility, and many children currently have an immigrant or ethnic minority background. A country's success in the

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integration of immigrants' children has wide-ranging consequences, and successful adaptation is therefore vital in social policy issues for many countries (Motti-Stefanidi, Asendorpf, and Masten 2012; Keles et al. 2018).

Inclusion of immigrants and ethnic minorities in the majority society, as a process of mutual adaptation between minority and majority communities, has always been a complex issue and policies can be significant tools for receiving countries to support immigrants' inclusion and foster social cohesion (Bauloz, Vathi, and Acosta 2019). Inclusion is related to diverse and interdependent societal and policy areas such as language, labour market inclusion, education, and political participation, and inclusion outcomes in one area are likely to impact the other (Bauloz, Vathi, and Acosta 2019). Immigration is, hence, not only a key social and political issue but also a key issue for education (Tobin and Kurban 2010). Education may provide an opportunity for equity and social inclusion of children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds by providing inclusive, culturally responsive and caring learning environments (Cefai et al. 2015) and is a central tenet in the United Nations Sustainable Development goal number 4 on quality education (United Nations 2015). Inclusion of pupils into regular education is defined as 'taking a full and active part in school-life, be a valued member of the school community and be seen as an integral member' (Farrell 2000, 154). Social inclusion, on the other hand, refers to social acceptance by peers (and also teachers) rather than just having a shared physical space such as attending the same school or classroom (Juvonen et al. 2019). Hence, educational environments characterised by positive peer and teacher relationships and intergroup harmony for all students regardless of immigrant and ethnic backgrounds can be defined as socially inclusive (Juvonen et al. 2019; Nishina et al. 2019). Socially inclusive environments are considered to have less victimisation, prejudice, discrimination and loneliness, but more belongingness, positive cross-group interactions and a feeling of safety (Nishina et al. 2019). Since having caring friends as a developmental necessity helps students do better in school, such environments, eventually are expected to promote not only social well-being but also learning and psychological well-being (Nishina et al. 2019).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) and schools are the primary formal societal institutions that children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds encounter and they play an important role in creating a culture of equality, tolerance and unity in diversity (Zaķe 2010; Bauloz, Vathi, and Acosta 2019). ECEC settings are the initial context in which children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds face the differences between the home culture and the culture of the majority (Tobin and Kurban 2010). Hence, ECEC settings can be the right time to develop interventions to decrease exclusion and increase inclusion (Harrist and Bradley 2003). ECEC settings are places where children learn socialisation, and teachers at this level should also be able to make social inclusion interventions part of their curriculum (Harrist and Bradley 2003). Through shared activities in a preschool classroom, high levels of cooperative play and early childhood friendship may promote social inclusion among minority and majority children. For example, research on the importance of intergroup contact showed that children who developed cross-ethnic friendships in early years are more likely to have an integrated social network as they get older (Aboud et al. 2012). Therefore, educators and policy makers focus on developing multicultural education programmes especially for the early childhood years to prevent and reduce discrimination

and to enhance social inclusion. These programmes may provide children with the necessary social and cognitive skills needed to work and play with peers and increase opportunities to befriend others from the different ethnic and cultural backgrounds (Aboud et al. 2012). Yet, there are various theoretical perspectives highlighting such complex reasons as social-cognitive biases, contextual conditions and person-group interactions that may underlie social inclusionary or exclusionary behaviours of children; hence, making it challenging to intervene with the social processes (Juvonen 2019).

In this review, we aim at extracting and synthesising the literature on the interventions to foster social inclusion of preschool-aged children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. To our knowledge, this is the first systematic review with a focus on (a) social inclusion interventions, (b) in preschool context, and (c) with children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. Our research question was 'what are the common elements of interventions for social inclusion of preschool children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds?' More specifically, we sought to examine what the common elements of effective or ineffective interventions for social inclusion of preschool children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds are, and what recommendations can be made to enhance their social inclusion in line with the extant literature.

Method

The systematic review was performed in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) statement (Moher et al. 2009). In our review, we followed the steps in line with the recommendations from van Wesel, Boeije, and Alisic (2015): (a) literature search, (b) study identification, (c) data extraction/study coding, (d) study quality appraisal and (e) thematic analysis.

Literature search

We conducted a systematic literature search of English language articles in April 2020 and the search was conducted in various steps. First, we conducted an electronic search in three databases: ERIC, PsycINFO and Scopus. Four categories of search terms were identified: social inclusion, preschool children, immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, and interventions. More specifically, the search strategy included the terms social inclusion, social integration, social participation, social acceptance, peer acceptance, social belonging, or social interaction and was not restricted by date. These were combined by the Boolean operator 'AND' with terms describing other search domains of immigrant and ethnic minority background, preschool context and intervention (see detailed search syntaxes in Appendix A). Depending on relevance, the first and second authors independently screened titles, abstracts or full texts following the removal of duplicates. Secondly, we hand-searched the references in the studies we identified.

Study identification and data extraction

The inclusion criteria for this systematic review were set a priori in terms of topic, target group and intervention, and were as follows: The study should include (a) an

intervention, (b) to enhance social inclusion (c) of preschool-age children[2] (i.e. 0 to 6 years of age) with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. Exclusion criteria were thus related to a lack of intervention (intervention), a different target group (e.g. primary school children, children with special needs) (target group) and without a focus on social inclusion (topic). We did not include any design limitation for the interventions (e.g. randomised control trials). We only included studies published in peer-reviewed journals, since the peer review process is one way of attempting to ensure methodological rigour (Klein, Jacobs, and Reinecke 2007). Hence, we excluded grey literature. And we limited our search to papers published in English.

Two-stage independent screening was carried out in April–May 2020. Disagreements in the inclusion process were resolved through discussion among the first and second authors. Then, detailed information about each study was extracted and entered into a spreadsheet by the first author in June 2020, in order to identify characteristics of the studies, intervention details and results, and to synthesise the common themes across included articles. The second author checked all the data extracted.

Study quality

The methodological quality of the included studies was assessed separately by the first and second authors. For the quantitative studies a standardised evaluation framework, the Evaluation of Public Health Practice Projects (EPHPP) was used to determine study quality (Thomas et al. 2004; EPHPP 2010). The EPHPP evaluates research on six characteristics as 'strong,' 'moderate' or 'weak': selection bias, study design, confounders, blinding, data collection methods, and withdrawals and dropouts. Although originally designed for the public health context, this quality assessment tool has often been applied to other research with behavioural outcomes (Larrabee Sønderlund, Hughes, and Smith 2019). For the qualitative studies, the Qualitative Research Checklist (QRC) was used (CASP 2006). QRC consist of 10 'yes/no' questions addressing the quality of the study. These questions were scored −1 (for 'no'), 0 (for 'can't tell') or 1 (for 'yes'), leading to a possible score of −10 to 10.

Data synthesis: thematic analysis

Data across included studies were synthesised and integrated into broader conclusions using thematic analysis (Bryman 2016). We identified and presented the prominent themes that emerged from the studies, and the key factors of the interventions promoting social inclusion of immigrant and ethnic background preschool children. Extracted data were initially synthesised by the first author and the synthesis was reviewed by the second author to decide on the appropriateness of the themes for further interpretation.

Results

Study identification

The electronic search produced 1108 articles among the three databases: 173 from ERIC, 94 from PsycINFO and 841 from Scopus. The titles and abstracts of these studies were

uploaded to the EPPI-Reviewer database (http://eppi.ioe.ac.uk/cms/). After removing 182 duplicates, 926 articles remained for independent screening. Out of these 926 papers, 894 articles were eliminated after initial review due to violation of at least one of the inclusion criteria: excluded due to topic ($k = 510$), target group ($k = 593$) and intervention ($k = 78$). In addition to the 32 papers identified for consideration based on a review of titles and abstracts, two articles were also located through the reference search process. In total, the full texts of 34 studies were uploaded into EPPI Reviewer and thoroughly read, and 27 were excluded after review of the full text (see Appendix B for the excluded studies). As a result, seven articles were included in this qualitative synthesis. Figure 1 shows the details of the method of literature search and criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies.

Study characteristics

From seven studies included, three studies had been conducted in the USA. The rest of the articles involved samples from Europe, including one study with data from six
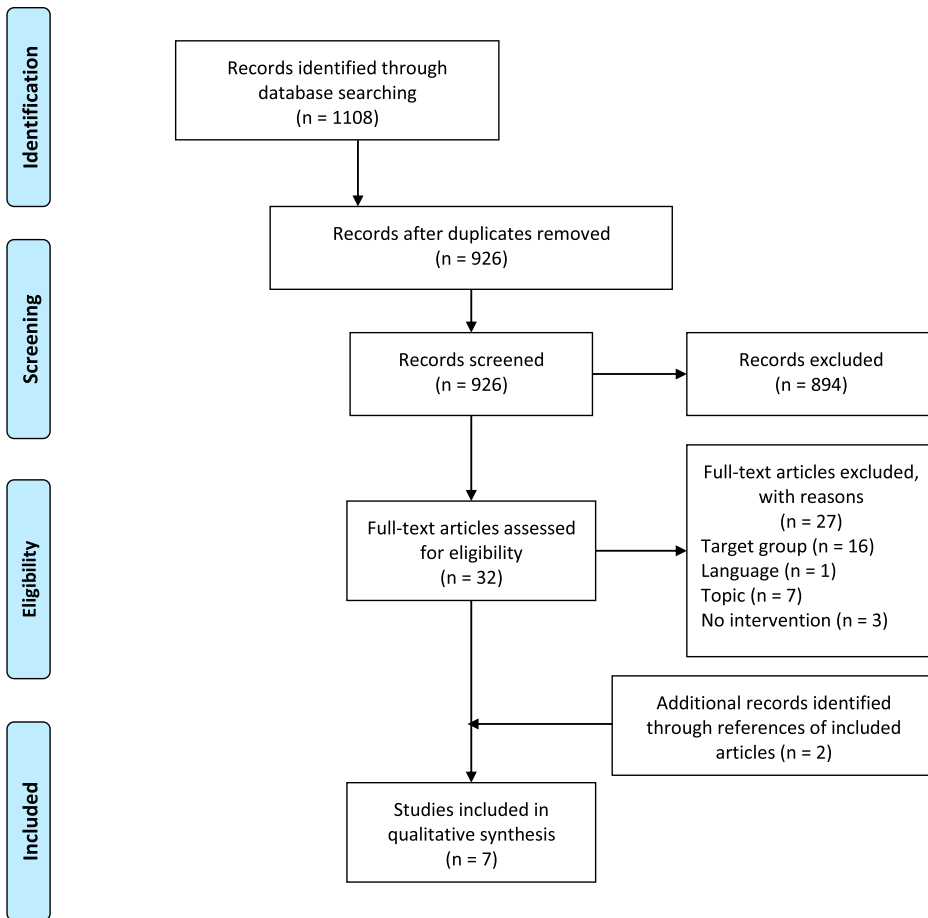
Figure 1. Flow diagram for the search and inclusion criteria for studies in this review from Moher (2009).

European countries and the other with survey data from 21 countries as well as case studies conducted in Serbia and the UK. One study was based on the quasi-experimental design with pre- and post-test surveys, while the others included ethnographic, case study approach with multiple data collection methods including interviews, observations, and surveys. None of the studies applied randomised control trial (RCT) design. Two of the studies in Europe specifically focused on Roma children, and another one on disadvantaged groups of children including Roma, immigrant and refugee children. There was a wide range in sample sizes with various sources of data including children, parents and teachers.

Table 1A (see Appendix C) shows a complete overview of the included studies and their characteristics. We also evaluated and reported how social inclusion was defined and/or evaluated in the included studies in Table 1A.

Study quality

The quality assessment results for each study are presented in Table 1. All articles were coded independently by the first and second authors, compared and the disagreements were resolved via consensus (93% agreement among two coders). Overall, since there

Table 1. Quality assessment of included studies.

Quality assessment tool	Included studies		
EPHPP	Giménez-Dasí et al. 2016	Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa 2019	
1. Selection bias	Moderate	Strong	
2. Study design	Moderate	Moderate	
3. Confounders	Strong	Weak	
4. Blinding	N/A	N/A	
5. Data collection method	Strong	Strong	
6. Withdrawals and dropouts	Strong	Strong	
QRC	Cefai et al. 2015	Klaus and Siraj 2020	Zake 2010
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	1	1	1
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	1	1	1
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	1	1	1
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	0	1	0
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	1	1	1
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	0	0	0
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	0	1	0
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	0	0	0
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	1	1	1
10. Is the research valuable?	1	1	1
TOTAL	6	8	6

Not Suitable for Quality Assessment
Tazi, Vidal, and Stein 2015
Bracco and Eisenberg 2017

Notes. EPHPP = Evaluation of Public Health Practice Projects; QRC = Qualitative Research Checklist.

was no RCT, the blinding category was not applicable for any of the quantitative studies included. Moreover, since two of the articles (Tazi, Vidal, and Stein 2015; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017) were not research papers but more a description of what they did as the intervention rather than what they studied and the outcomes, the quality assessment categories were not applicable.

Thematic analysis

To identify common themes across the studies and factors that might lead to effective social inclusion interventions for preschool children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds, thematic analysis was used. As a result, the following key themes were identified during this analysis process: (a) a strength-based approach, not a deficit-based one (i.e. Cefai et al. 2015; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017; Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa 2019); (b) involvement of family and the larger community (i.e. Zaķe 2010; Cefai et al. 2015; Tazi, Vidal, and Stein 2015; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017; Klaus and Siraj 2020); (c) importance of cultural brokerage (i.e. Zaķe 2010; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017; Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa 2019; Klaus and Siraj 2020) and (d) importance of intergroup contact to reduce prejudice, discrimination and improve social relations (i.e. Zaķe 2010; Cefai et al. 2015; Tazi, Vidal, and Stein 2015; Giménez-Dasí et al. 2016; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017; Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa 2019; Klaus and Siraj 2020).

Three of the articles (Cefai et al. 2015; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017; Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa 2019) mentioned a strength-based approach with seeing immigrant and ethnic backgrounds' members of the society as assets rather than burdens to increase the possibility of their acceptance. A strength-based approach reflects a goal-oriented and solution-focused collaborative approach building on and assessing talents and resources rather than deficits (Rapp, Saleebey, and Sullivan 2006). Hence, it involves collaboration with immigrants and appreciation and use of their resources such as their home language or culture to connect with larger communities and institutions such as schools (Bracco and Eisenberg 2017). Not seeing immigrants as problems but realising their contributions to a community helps to strengthen the whole community through the healthy integration of immigrants. For example, in the *Parent–Child Together* intervention bringing the home language and home culture and customs of immigrant parents and children for bilingual education increased acceptance and social behaviour. In the *resilience curriculum*, Cefai et al. (2015) focused on the resilience concept that reflects strengths model thinking by focusing on the inner strength and empowering the vulnerable children to use their strengths such as self-awareness, optimism, empathy and collaboration to overcome such challenges like social exclusion and discrimination. One of the important components of the curriculum was not just 'not addressing' the deficits but also building on strengths through creating a positive self-concept and self-esteem and using these strengths in academic and social engagement. On the other hand, Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa (2019) respond to the call for a focus on the positive development of children of colour by employing strength-based orientation towards peer play within immigrant communities and examining how specific features of the peer environment support high engagement with peers.

The importance of the involvement of family and the larger community for the social inclusion of preschool children was emphasised in five of the articles included (71%).

Some of these interventions directly focused on the parents and/or the larger community (e.g. Tazi, Vidal, and Stein 2015; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017) with the idea that immigrant parents play a significant role in their children's integration into and success in school, while others encouraged the involvement of parents and communication between teachers and parents to contribute to their children's inclusion (e.g. Zaķe 2010; Klaus and Siraj 2020). By engaging parents and inviting them to explore child development and parenting skills, in addition to child education and parent–child interaction, these programmes improved their child's skills as well as their own, and reduced their feelings of isolation. In addition, for example, in *Arte Juntos/Art Together* intervention museum-school collaboration offered opportunities for learning about the needs and assets of children, parents and teachers, delivering equitable learning opportunities for immigrant children and their families and building bridges towards social inclusion (Tazi, Vidal, and Stein 2015).

The importance of cultural brokerage was also emphasised in a majority of articles (i.e. Zaķe 2010; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017; Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa 2019; Klaus and Siraj 2020). Cultural brokering was introduced as a concept in education in the 1970s. It creates a positive impact in education with the role it plays in helping young children and families from diverse backgrounds, especially from marginalised communities, through exchanging knowledge and information across different groups, facilitating communication and engaging in problem solving and mediation (Martinez-Cosio and Iannacone 2007; Klaus and Siraj 2020). By using Roma assistants as cultural brokers as the main intervention, two studies (Zaķe 2010; Klaus and Siraj 2020) showed how cultural brokerage improved attitudes and social cohesion towards a discriminated group of children. The Roma assistants served as role models, overcoming stereotypes and improving integration in the preschool context. These assistants, cultural brokers, helped the Roma pupils to continue education and improve the quality of relationships with their teachers and peers, supported schools in developing an inclusive learning environment, reduced discrimination against the vulnerable groups of children, as well as mediating the collaboration between Roma families, schools and local communities. In other articles, the importance of cultural brokerage was indicated as a part of the implementation of the interventions. For example, Bracco and Eisenberg (2017) indicated the role of working in partnership with the school district and of sharing experiences of former resident parents to assist preschool-age children and their parents served in the *Parent–Child Together* program.

The last and most common theme emerged in the included articles was the importance of intergroup contact to reduce discrimination and improve social relations of children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds and their families. Allport's Intergroup Contact Theory argues that through meaningful interaction between in- and out-group members (e.g. majority and immigrant and ethnic minority members in a society), and common goals and cooperation, we can reduce prejudice and discrimination and foster intergroup attitudes and cross-group friendship (Allport 1954). Research shows that not only through direct contact (e.g. cross-ethnic friendships) but also through extended contact (e.g. using cultural artefacts such as books) and even imagined contact (e.g. imaginary play involving characters from different groups having positive relations), contact between different social groups can promote social integration (Jones and Rutland 2018). All of the interventions included in this review promoted

direct or indirect contact within and outside the school context. The *Thinking emotions* intervention involved direct play among Roma and non-Roma students to promote the quality of children's peer relationships during preschool (Giménez-Dasí et al. 2016), whereas in another study (Sanders, Molgaard, and Shigemasa 2019), cultural artefacts like culturally diverse toys and books were used to create openness among children towards differences and appreciation of cultural diversity to support social interaction.

Discussion

This systematic review investigated the interventions to promote social inclusion of pre-school-age children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. Since social development during the preschool years is associated with children's overall development and school-readiness (Murano, Sawyer, and Lipnevich 2020), efforts to promote social inclusion and positive social functioning among pre-schoolers are highly important. In addition, it is extra important for children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds that interventions occur early to prevent them from entering school with skill gaps which may reinforce barriers to their educational and social integration in the long run.

Through the comprehensive literature search, only seven studies were identified. This finding itself reflects the need for more research. Research on interventions supporting social inclusion of immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds among young children in ECEC was sparse in the literature, and there is a clear need for more research in this area with methodologically rigorous evaluations of interventions aiming at having a positive effect on social inclusion of these children. This is an important need not only for the welfare of immigrant and ethnic minority children and their families, but also for teachers, educational policy makers and society at large.

Even though the interventions varied significantly in nature, we identified four main themes across the programmes that were found to be of importance in promoting the social inclusion of immigrant and ethnic minority background preschool children. The main themes we identified were; (1) a strength-based approach, (2) involvement of family and the larger community, (3) importance of cultural brokerage and (4) importance of meaningful intergroup contact to reduce prejudice, discrimination and improve social relation.

The first theme is based upon a strength rather than deficit perspective of the children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds. A deficit perspective is generally concerned with a focus on what a group lacks, such as knowledge or skills or not learning due to language barriers (Valencia 2012). Instead of labelling immigrants as a burden or threat to a society, strength-based approaches acknowledge the knowledge, skills and cultural resources of immigrant communities (Rapp, Saleebey, and Sullivan 2006; Bracco and Eisenberg 2017). For example, among the included studies, Bracco and Eisenberg (2017) promote community involvement through using appreciation and use of immigrants' home language and culture as a bridge to promote understanding and connection with institutions including schools, while Cefai et al. (2015) focused on the resilience concept with a focus on the inner strength of children such as self-awareness, optimism, empathy and collaboration, to overcome such challenges like social exclusion and discrimination. The concept of inclusion itself refutes the deficit approach. Social inclusion,

creating positive peer and teacher relationships and intergroup harmony regardless of immigrant and ethnic backgrounds, is about 'making sure that all children and adults are able to participate as valued, respected and contributing members of society' (Friendly and Lero 2002, viii). For full inclusion, differences and diversity should be recognised rather than ignored, since silence about differences can reinforce negative attitudes (Harry 2005). Positive attitudes towards diversity are essential for an inclusive society but social inclusion is beyond just accepting and recognising diversity. It is concerned with removing barriers to provide equal opportunities. It is also worth noting that the concept of resilience should be used with caution, since working on building individual and familial resilience 'does not have to concurrently be a fix for the societal structures that cause these individuals, families, and groups to be "at risk"' (Prowell 2019, 124).

Most of the studies included in this systematic review emphasised the importance of the involvement of family and the larger community for the social inclusion of preschool children. During the preschools years, parents act as critical stakeholders who are also important in the development of their children's social skills (Murano, Sawyer, and Lipnevich 2020). Hence, the involvement of parents along with teachers in social inclusion interventions in early childhood is logical. However, we should be aware of the fact that what parental involvement is and means can be culturally divergent (Guo 2013). In some cultures, parental involvement in schools may have negative associations, whereas the non-involvement of immigrant parents can be perceived as ignorance by mainstream teachers. Such situations should be recognised and better handled. In addition, parents may feel incompetent due to language barriers, hence involving them in social inclusion interventions can be mutually beneficial. For example, the *Parent–Child Together* programme (Bracco and Eisenberg 2017) revealed that involving parents and the larger community and incorporating their home language, culture and values led to greater acceptance of diversity and improved social behaviours. School-based community-level interventions in relation to social inclusion of immigrant and ethnic minority children with a multicultural approach to diversity rather than a colour-blind approach will also support the intergroup attitudes of and towards immigrant children (Gönültaş and Mulvey 2019).

The importance of using cultural brokers acting as communication facilitators and negotiators among different stakeholders like immigrant children, parents and schools as a support system to enhance services for immigrant and ethnic minority students was also another important theme that emerged from the included interventions. Using cultural brokerage in education can be one way to address broader social issues like discrimination, and can be effective when beginning to deal with those challenges in the ECEC settings (Klaus and Siraj 2020). These brokers were helpful to assist the children and their families to deal with such barriers as language, culture (e.g. different school expectations) and acculturation, and acted as an important role to improve their social inclusion.

The fourth theme identified in the included studies was the role of meaningful intergroup contact among in- and out-group members (e.g. majority and immigrant and ethnic minority members in a society) in promoting social inclusion. Meaningful interaction between different group members, and creating common goals and cooperation such as cooperation through and in play, may foster intergroup attitudes and cross-group friendship also reduce prejudice and discrimination (Allport 1954). However, as

Allport also noted, making contact between groups work to reduce prejudice is more complicated than simply putting people in the same room. The four conditions that he mentions are equal status, common goals, cooperation and institutional support. This would imply that teachers of young children also need to consider how to create environments and activities that support meaningful interaction. Through creating interaction in interventions, it is possible to develop cultural awareness/learning and cultural exchange which may further create connectedness, give children safety and make them more social, make friends outside of their in-group, establish social networks (Gönültaş and Mulvey 2019; Hettich, Seidel, and Stuhrmann 2020). Moreover, as prejudice develops relatively early in childhood, interventions involving value education with a focus on tolerance, justice, equity and inclusion in the early years might be beneficial for promoting intergroup inclusion and reducing social exclusion (Walker et al. 2019).

Since research shows the important role of parents in the development of intergroup attitudes, future interventions should also target the ethnicity- and immigration-related attitudes of the majority of children and their parents. Children learn stereotypes and prejudice through their parents as the first socialising agents in their lives, and mimic prejudicial attitudes and behaviours of their parents which shape their intergroup contact with immigrants (Gönültaş and Mulvey 2019). Hence, interventions that also target majority groups to promote social inclusion of immigrant and ethnic backgrounds children might be a better and more effective approach.

Both teachers and school context play an important role to facilitate positive intergroup attitudes and inclusion such as through promoting shared values (Walker et al. 2019). However, without clear guidance or effective interventions, socially including diverse groups of children might be extra challenging for majority culture teachers, who may also need support from the whole school system. Inclusion and inclusive education require certain pedagogical skills, behaviours and attitudes for teachers to manage diversity successfully (Lautenbach et al. 2020). Even though most teacher education programmes cover multicultural education to prepare teachers to work with diverse children and students, teachers may not feel prepared enough or equipped with the required skills and competencies (Thomassen and Munthe 2020). Moreover, in addition to cultural and language barriers, teachers' own stereotypic implicit or explicit attitudes and their biases towards immigrant and ethnic minority children can create further barriers for inclusion (Glock, Kovacs, and Pit-ten Cate 2019). Even if they are themselves open, but are aware of certain challenges and biases against cultural diversity in their environment, they may not express their opinions due to the sensitivity of such topics as racial attitudes and prejudices (Thomassen and Munthe 2020). Hence, these challenges should be taken into consideration both in teacher education and in the development of future interventions for social inclusion.

During the process of conducting this systematic review, some issues caught our attention. First of all, existing literature on social inclusion mainly consists of samples of children with special education needs such as disabilities or behavioural problems. Studies on the inclusion of children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds mostly focus on language inclusion, while the studies on social inclusion were sparse. Language development is clearly associated with emotional and social development (Giménez-Dasí et al. 2016). An ethnographic study conducted in Norwegian multicultural kindergartens revealed that using a music intervention to achieve second language acquisition also

resulted in better social inclusion through enhancing communication between children across language barriers and helping them to make friends. Hence, children may benefit from interventions focusing not only on language inclusion but also simultaneously on social inclusion with the use of such means as music and play.

Another main issue we came across was with regard to the definition of social inclusion in the included studies. Many of the studies lacked a clear and explicit definition or conceptualisation of what they mean by social inclusion, but it was referred from the context. Although many researchers use the social dimension of inclusion in their studies, it was still somewhat unclear what exactly they mean by it, and there is uncertainty and overlap on the use of such concepts as social inclusion, social integration and social participation (Koster et al. 2009). The analysis of these overlapping concepts in the special need context revealed that the social dimension of inclusion in the literature is described in numerous ways, and social inclusion is mostly described with such aspects as friendship, acceptance, interaction, relationships, social status and bullying. And its assessment included evaluation of performing a task together, play, as well as pupils' self-perception of acceptance, perceived loneliness and perceived social competence (Koster et al. 2009). In our review as well, all but one study (Bracco and Eisenberg 2017), did not include an explicit definition of social inclusion. Instead, we drew from the texts that it was understood as either reducing discrimination, prejudice, social exclusion and/or providing opportunities for positive participation in social activities, social connectedness and equal participation. This raises a clear need to better define and tackle the social part of inclusion both in research and policy.

This review is not without limitations. Our findings in this systematic review should be considered with caution, as this review included a small number of studies with varied interventions and designs. In addition, the sample in the two articles cannot be separated just for pre-schoolers. Hence, the generalisability of our findings is limited. None of the studies included in this review had an RCT design with high methodological rigour. We evaluated the quality of the included studies as a part of this systematic review, however, it is not always easy and straightforward to assess objectively the quality of the studies included. Furthermore, two of the studies were not research papers but more a description of the interventions rather than what was studied and the outcomes, hence the quality assessment categories were not applicable. And we should also remember that children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds are diverse, not a homogenous group of children, and this should be taken into account when developing socio-cultural environments for their integration.

Conclusion

The findings of this systematic review suggest that good-quality studies of interventions to promote social inclusion of children with immigrant and ethnic minority backgrounds are sparse. Based on the studies we identified, there are, however, indications that important themes to include in interventions are (1) a strength-based approach, (2) the involvement of family and the larger community, (3) cultural brokerage and (4) ways of enabling meaningful intergroup contact. More inclusive interventions should be developed and their effectiveness should be rigorously evaluated.

Notes

1. The terminology of immigrant and ethnic minorities is ambiguous with no universally accepted definition. In this article, the term immigrant and ethnic minorities are used to refer to those children who have minority status in the country they reside, with a history of migration and/or as a part of an ethnic of racial minority group with distinct culture, language, religion different from those of the rest of the population.
2. Due to some variations across countries in terms of preschool age (e.g. in Latvia preschool is compulsory for 5–7-old children), we checked the countries' preschool age range in the detected studies when we were in doubt.

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on contributors

Serap Keles is an Associate Professor in Psychology at the Knowledge Centre for Education, University of Stavanger, Norway. Her work mainly focuses on the sociocultural adaptation, education and mental health of children and youth, particularly with immigrant background. More specifically, she has a main interest in the area of acculturation of immigrant children and youth, where the goal is to understand the interplay between acculturation and developmental processes. Her methodological research interests include systematic reviews, meta-analysis, and longitudinal data analyses.

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