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Early interventions tackling inequalities experienced by immigrant, low-income, and Roma children in 8 European countries: a critical overview

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ABSTRACT

We analysed effective and promising interventions, within the classroom and school microsystems, aiming to promote equality and belongingness for immigrant, Roma, and low-income children attending early childhood education and care (ECEC) and primary education in eight European countries. Over 500 interventions were identified, and 78 interventions were analysed. We found that while 79% of the interventions provided some type of language support, only 32% considered children's heritage language. Importantly, around 22% of the interventions targeted ECEC settings specifically, with most ECEC interventions implemented at the national level, taking place in the classroom and implemented by classroom teachers, and involving language support and family involvement activities. Language support seems to be widespread, recognising the foundational nature of language for learning, communication, and belongingness. However, comprehensive intercultural policies that explicitly support culture maintenance, communication, and positive contact may be valuable in guiding future developments.

KEYWORDS

Inequalities; early childhood; interventions; language support; Europe; immigrant

Social, cultural, and economic inequalities hinder children's school performance, well-being, and social mobility (Hillmert 2013). Therefore, one of the main goals of Europe's education systems is to promote equity and social cohesion (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2013). Within a bioecological framework, social and educational inequalities must be analysed at multiple levels. At the individual and family level, we must attend to factors such as gender, socioeconomic status (SES), immigrant status, progress through education, and beliefs (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007). At the school

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level, important aspects include SES composition, learning environment, and teaching practices (OECD 2016). At the education system level, indicators such as structural organisation, school funding, and equity in resource allocation are important factors influencing disparities in school performance (OECD 2016).

In this study, we focussed on two major sources of social and educational inequality: SES and ethnic-minority or immigrant background. Specifically, we analysed inclusive practices at the classroom and school level as tools to reduce early social and educational inequalities. Classrooms and schools are important microsystems which influence children's development, learning, and wellbeing, while also being shaped by children's characteristics (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007).

International comparisons consistently show academic achievement gaps among children from low SES families or with immigrant/ethnic-minority background (OECD 2015a). Furthermore, the sense of belonging at school of immigrant children is lower in most countries, even after accounting for SES (OECD 2015a). Importantly, social exclusion and perceived discrimination have been consistently linked to poorer psychological and school adjustment as well as lower academic achievement (Hood, Bradley, and Ferguson 2017). These disadvantages jeopardize equality and inclusion in Europe's education systems.

Schools may promote inclusion through comprehensive equity schemes, including universal access to early childhood education and care (ECEC), encouraging the involvement of families and communities, preparing teachers to handle linguistic and cultural diversity, and increasing proficiency in both first and second languages (OECD 2015b, 2016). Importantly, first language support is key to multiculturalism as a policy (Berry and Ward 2016). According to Berry (1984, 2013), multicultural policies support: (a) cultural diversity, through the maintenance and development of heritage cultures; (b) intercultural contact, by sharing cultural expressions and providing opportunities for intergroup contact; and (c) intercultural communication, with the learning of official languages as a basis for participation. These components are the basis of the three main hypotheses (Berry 1984, 2013) of how multicultural policies operate: the multiculturalism, the integration, and the contact hypotheses. The multiculturalism hypothesis proposes that individuals' confidence in their own cultural or ethnic identity leads to less prejudice and discrimination and to increased respect for others (Berry 1984, 2013). The integration hypothesis posits that when individuals are engaged through intercultural contact both with their culture of origin and with the larger society, they experience higher levels of psychological and social adaptation (Nguyen and Benet-Martínez 2013). Finally, the contact hypothesis states that intergroup contact, under certain conditions (i.e. equal status, interdependence and common goals, and institutional support, namely through norms and laws facilitating contact and prohibiting discrimination), promotes mutual acceptance in diverse societies (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2011).

Importantly, it is not possible to fully implement multiculturalism as a policy without also fostering multilingualism. However, many European countries have a weak model of enhancement of multilingualism in the school system (Baker 2006). Existing policies lack a clear view of the political, cultural, and identity consequences generated by contexts that favour monolingualism, providing sparse opportunities for learning a minority language. A recent analysis of 42 education systems in Europe (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice 2019) suggests that only 13 support teaching of first languages (i.e. heritage

languages, first acquired within the family context). Furthermore, in these education systems, learning the first language at school is seldom a right, reflecting a prevalent monolingual paradigm in most European publicly-funded schools (Busch 2011).

Most multicultural educational programmes are not properly evaluated, and their efficacy is sometimes confounded with other key variables, such as the promotion of inter-group contact (Stephan, Renfro, and Stephan 2004; Zirkel 2008). It is important to disentangle the effects of programmes that rely on a more passive strategy (Bigler 1999) from those that take a more active approach (e.g. cooperative learning). Meta-analytic findings show that interventions using direct contact with social-cognitive training are effective in promoting positive attitudes and relations in childhood and adolescence (Beelmann and Heinemann 2014). Further, interventions aiming to reduce ethnic prejudice and discrimination in early childhood show positive effects on the attitudes of ethnic majority children, with contact and media/instruction interventions demonstrating to be equally effective (Aboud et al. 2012). Relatedly, a recent meta-analysis on school interventions to improve children's and adolescent's intergroup relations highlighted several key aspects that should be considered when critically evaluating available interventions (Ülger et al. 2018). While the authors reported a moderate effect of anti-prejudice interventions in schools, several factors impacted effectiveness: teacher-led interventions were not as effective as researcher-led interventions; individual interventions were more effective at tackling intergroup attitudes; and interventions based on contact were highly effective among younger children, whereas social categorisation interventions (focussing on change in children's social identities) were particularly effective in middle- and high-school students.

In this study, we analysed key features of effective and promising interventions in the classroom and school microsystems to increase equality for immigrant, low-income, and Roma children in eight countries: Czech Republic, England, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal. Immigrant and low-income children were selected due to the persistent social and educational inequalities they face (OECD 2015a). Roma children were considered because they are amongst the most deprived and discriminated ethnic minorities in Europe (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights 2016) and their inclusion is a special challenge across European countries (Klaus and Marsh 2014). Importantly, the eight participant countries represent different geographical areas of Europe and diverse education systems.

For our purposes, interventions could address curriculum, defined as the 'knowledge, skills, and values that children are meant to attain' (Sylva et al. 2016). Interventions could also address pedagogy, defined as 'the practice (or the art, the science or the craft) of teaching' (Sylva et al. 2016), with a focus on the instructional dimension. Finally, interventions could tackle social climate, with a focus on relational dimensions such as respect for diversity, connectedness, engagement, and social support (Thapa et al. 2013).

Effective interventions were those with effectiveness data, based on high-quality research designs such as randomised control trials or quasi-experimental studies. Promising interventions were defined as innovative practices for which effectiveness data, based on high-quality research designs, were not (yet) available. Nevertheless, they had unpublished evidence or evidence published in grey literature; were novel for the context; and/or were highly considered among stakeholders.

We aimed to investigate the extent to which interventions focussed on (a) the maintenance and development of heritage cultures, to support children's and families' positive cultural ethnic identities (Berry 1984, 2013); (b) intergroup contact, to promote mutual acceptance and reduce prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2011); (c) promotion of multilingualism, to support communication (Baker 2006); and (d) family involvement to support children's learning and wellbeing (Epstein 2011). We also documented the extent to which interventions used didactic (e.g. traditional readings and lectures) vs. interactive approaches (e.g. role-playing, simulation games, group exercises) to promote positive attitudes towards minorities and intergroup relations (Beelmann and Heinemann 2014). Finally, we documented the extent to which implementation relied on teachers or external experts, considering the need to qualify and empower teachers (Peeters and Sharma 2014; Ülger et al. 2018). We attended to level of education, by comparing interventions targeting ECEC and primary education, the earlier levels within most education systems.

Method

Inclusion, exclusion, and priority criteria

Interventions were selected through the PICOS search strategy (Methley et al. 2014). Accordingly, the search was based on specific inclusion and exclusion criteria (Table 1) related to the population, intervention, comparison group(s), outcomes, and study design. In some countries, based on the inclusion criteria, we identified a considerable number of interventions. In these cases, the country team selected up to 15 interventions for analysis, based on the priority criteria (Table 1), while also ensuring the inclusion of less well-known yet promising interventions.

Search strategies

Search strategies included (1) requesting information from local, regional, or national stakeholders and experts, and (2) searching governmental and NGO's publications and websites, national and international databases, university repositories, and national specialised journals. For database searches, we used search strings such as *Intervention OR practice OR strategies OR program AND Immigrants OR Roma* OR ethnic minorities OR low socioeconomic status OR low-income AND curriculum OR pedagogy OR teaching OR school climate OR multicultural education OR multilingual education AND Preschool* OR early childhood education OR school OR classroom OR primary OR basic education*. When searching in EBSCO or Web of Science, researchers used the language filter to select their country language and/or included their country as an additional keyword.

In the case of England, the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF, <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/>) has produced a toolkit comparing the effectiveness of various interventions/approaches designed to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers. This was done to help schools choose the most effective interventions/approaches to spend their pupil premium funding on. For this analysis, 15 programmes were chosen out of those presented in the EEF toolkit with a

Table 1. Inclusion, exclusion, and priority criteria.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria	
Population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3-10/12-year-olds, attending centre-based ECEC or primary school • Evidence on or specifically targeting children from immigrant, Roma, or low-income backgrounds¹ • Exclusion of interventions targeting children with disabilities
Intervention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aimed at reducing educational and social inequalities • Implemented in or promoted by centre-based ECEC or primary schools • Focus on curriculum, pedagogy, and/or school climate • Designed and/or implemented in the last 10 years • Effective or promising • Positive and strengths-based approach • Goals and strategies described in a written document
Comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No treatment or reference treatment (e.g. 'treatment as usual') • Not required for single-case designs and promising interventions
Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Any outcome (academic outcomes or skills for lifelong learning)
Study design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Randomised control trials • Quasi-experimental • Other designs, for promising interventions only
Priority criteria	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ongoing • Focus on language support • Local/less known • Sophisticated use of information and communications technology • High reputation among stakeholders • Diversity of types of interventions

¹In Poland, interventions targeting children from rural areas were eligible. ECEC = Early Childhood Education and Care.

focus on language and literacy learning. Within this group, we chose interventions which included one of the following elements: oral language learning, digital technology, teaching assistant lead, and literacy-catch-up.

Table 2 presents, for each country, the number of interventions initially identified, the number of interventions considered eligible according to the inclusion criteria, and the number of interventions selected upon application of the priority criteria.

Coding

After selection, country teams coded each intervention, extracting specific information (Table 3), based on the best available evidence (e.g. study, report). Ethical conduct guidelines were considered by analysing publicly available information and/or data supplied with permission from key stakeholders. In addition, we selected interventions consistent with a strengths-based approach.

Analyses

We conducted descriptive analysis of the key features of the interventions. We also conducted content analysis of the key descriptions of selected interventions, focussing on their specific goals, strategies, and activities. Interventions were the unit of analysis.

Table 2. Number of interventions identified, eligible, and selected for analysis.

Country	Interventions identified	Interventions eligible	Interventions selected
Czech Republic	30	10 ¹	6
England ²	~100	26	15
Germany	19	14	9
Greece	56	22	13
Italy ³	15+	9	7
Netherlands	57	10	10
Poland ⁴	~222	3	3
Portugal	89	15+	14

¹The difference between the number of eligible and selected interventions is related to the option to focus on less known interventions developed in the Czech context. Therefore, interventions generally known and widespread in other European countries were not selected.

²The EEF toolkit reviews over 100 projects which were recently carried out in England. They were designed and funded with the aim to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers. Evaluation reports can be found on the EEF website. We focussed on the school themes and toolkit strands 'Literacy' (26 projects), 'Digital Technology' (28 projects), and 'Collaborative Learning' (12 projects). We also reviewed programmes which were chosen as part of the 'Literacy and Numeracy catch-up strategies' (24 programmes), and teacher-led interventions on literacy (5 programmes).

³Some interventions (regarding migrants' inclusion and integration, foreign language teaching and learning, use of ICT) were not included in this study, because of their specific focus on teachers'/educators' training, or their target age group (e.g. *POI - Portfolio of Integration; Better teachers for better students' language skills; Connecting to Europe*, etc.).

⁴According to the legal regulations, the Polish education system aims to meet the educational needs of every individual child within the free of charge and universally accessible provision (access to educational services is universal from the age of 3, and the age of 6 is the compulsory school age). Within their contracts, teachers have time for the organisation of extracurricular compensatory activities. Classes are organised at the level of the classroom/school and are implemented according to the internally established programmes/plans reflecting the needs of every group of children/individual child. Additionally, all children and families are entitled to free of charge support of Psycho-Pedagogical Counselling Centres, which are the local providers responsible for planning and implementation of actions aimed at quality improvement of educate services, inter alia by: diagnoses of children and adolescents, direct psychological and pedagogical assistance for children, adolescents and parents. To sum up, programmes/approaches aimed to reduce educational inequalities organised within the public sector have individual character or aim to reduce educational inequalities by improving quality of educate services to all children. Still, on most occasions evaluation of actions is not available. Plans of work with individual children are to be adjusted to the child's current situation.

Results

Over 500 interventions were identified, with over 100 considered eligible for this study. Based on the application of priority criteria by country teams, 78 interventions were selected for review and analyses. Selected interventions varied considerably regarding expected outcomes and goals. Multiple outcomes could be addressed by each intervention. Around 72% of interventions targeted language skills and around 32% of interventions targeted academic/cognitive skills. Intercultural competence and awareness were targeted by 24% of the interventions. Furthermore, 17% of interventions expected improved teacher/staff professional skills, and family involvement goals were considered in approximately 12% of interventions.

General characteristics of the interventions

As shown in Table 4, around 32% of the interventions targeted mixed groups (i.e. a combination of groups of children such as immigrant/low-income or Roma/low-income). Across the eight participating countries, circa 17% of the interventions targeted Roma children specifically. Almost two thirds of the interventions were designed for primary school, with only around 22% targeting ECEC settings specifically. Over half of the interventions focussed on a combination of curriculum, pedagogy, and social climate

Table 3. Main categories for extracting information.

General information	Type of author(s): researchers, practitioners, other Type of organisation that developed the intervention Availability of funding
Inclusion criteria	Target group(s): immigrants, Roma, and/or low-income Age of participants Level of education: early childhood education and/or primary school Focus: curriculum, pedagogical practices, and/or school climate Level of evidence: effective vs. promising Reasons for considering the intervention promising Year(s) of implementation Priority criteria considered
Characteristics of the intervention	Main goal(s) Theoretical framework Level of implementation: national, federal/state/regional, local Number of children, classrooms, and/or schools enrolled Delivery mode: universal vs. targeted Eligibility criteria Participation requirements: mandatory vs. voluntary Setting: embedded in classroom activities vs. pull-out Responsibility for implementation: teacher, specialised professional, other Training required for implementation Dosage: number of sessions, hours per session Outcomes targeted Activities, strategies, and materials Role of information and communications technology Role of heritage language(s) Role of language support Role of families
Scientific evidence	Effectiveness evaluation available Study design: experimental, quasi-experimental, correlational, other Type of data: quantitative, qualitative, both Sample of the evaluation study Existence and type of comparison group Assessments: pre/post-test vs. post-test Relevant findings Social validation data: stakeholder perspectives

dimensions. Regarding level of evidence, 76% of interventions were considered promising. In addition, over 83% of interventions received funding.

Language support

While 79% of the interventions provided some type of language support (Table 5), only 32% of the interventions considered children's heritage language. For example, the 'MAUS – Language support for multilingual children' ECEC intervention, in Germany, included a parental workshop aiming to 'convey appreciation for the heritage language and encourage parents to speak the heritage language with their children (...), considering the heritage language as a resource and not as a burden.'

Diverse types of language support activities were identified. Almost 41% of selected interventions included conventional language lessons or reading and writing activities. For example, the PLUSVALOR primary school intervention, in Italy, offered 'Language courses for children/teenagers, addressed to both immigrant and non-immigrant children (...) only in Arab-language'. Language support embedded in classroom activities and

Table 4. Frequencies for target group, level of education, focus, and level of evidence.

Country	N	Target group					Level of education			Focus			Level of evidence		
		Immigrants	Roma	Low income	Mixed	Universal	ECEC	Primary School	ECEC + primary school	Curriculum	Pedagogy	Social climate	Mixed	Effective	Promising
Czech Republic	6	1	1		4		2	3	1		2		4	2	4
England	15			8	7		1	12	2	2	7		6	8	7
Germany	10	5			2	3	5	3	2	2	1		7	4	6
Greece	13	5	7		1		2	10	1				13		13
Italy	7	3	2		1	1		4	3	1		2	4		7
Netherlands	10	1			9		7	1	2		4		6	3	7
Poland	3			1		2*		3			2		1	1	2
Portugal	14	3	3	3	1	4	1	11	2	2	9	2	1	1	13
Total	78	18	13	12	25	10	17	47	14	7	25	4	42	19	59

Note. ECEC = Early childhood education and care. * Universal within rural areas.

routines was documented in 22% of the interventions. For example, within the ‘Language builds strength’ intervention, in Germany, ‘supported language learning in small groups is supplemented by activities in daily routines, in which all children are involved (e.g. using new vocabulary in play situations with other children)’. Finally, 19% of the interventions provided language support within the context of play- or arts- based language-enrichment activities. For example, in ‘Speech Bubbles’, in England, ‘drama practitioners and school staff create a safe and playful space for children in KS1 to develop their communication skills. The story-drama approach places the child at the centre of the activity, and they become at different times, author, performer, and audience.’ The first type of interventions addressed language support explicitly and the remaining two types addressed language support implicitly.

Family involvement

Regarding the role of families (Table 5), only 41% of selected interventions included explicit family involvement activities. Diverse family involvement activities were described. For example, ‘Diadrasis: An Interactive Project on Language Teaching to Immigrant Families in a Greek School’, in Greece, ‘gave parents the opportunity to participate in their children’s classes and share a school activity that allowed them to connect their personal life stories, their languages and cultures with the school context.’

Multicultural curricula, contact, and interactive approaches

Multicultural curricula activities directed at both children and teachers were found in nearly 12% and 4% of the interventions, respectively. For example, in Greece, ‘My first book on bilingualism – Between the Greek and the Arab World’, promoted ‘the Arabic language and culture (...) an equivalent ‘tour’ to another culture or country, with information provided by the bilingual children’.

Further, collaborative learning activities were briefly reported in 6% of selected interventions. In England, the ‘Success for All’ programme ‘encourages children to work together and interact with each other to think creatively and solve problems.’ Interestingly, references to the social composition of peer groups or dyads were found in only 4% of selected interventions, with all occurrences describing performance homogeneity as the criterium for establishing groups/dyads. Anti-bias activities were briefly reported in 4% of selected interventions. For example, in Germany, ‘Persona Dolls are dolls with a

Table 5. Frequencies for support of heritage language, language support, and family involvement.

Country	N	Heritage language support	Language support	Family involvement
Czech Republic	6	1	5	0
England	15	0	13	3
Germany	10	2	10	6
Greece	13	12	12	4
Italy	7	5	5	6
Netherlands	10	2	9	10
Poland	3	0	0	1
Portugal	14	3	6	1
Total	78	25	60	31

fixed personality, having a name, age, personal preferences, a history and particular physical characteristics. As children realise that they share experiences and similarities with the Persona Dolls, they learn how to choose empathy over prejudices.’

Comparisons as a function of level of education

As shown in Table 6, most ECEC interventions were implemented at the national level, while primary school interventions were mainly local. Both ECEC and primary school interventions were mostly targeted, even though a considerable number of primary school interventions were also universally implemented. Most ECEC interventions took place in the classroom, while primary school interventions were distributed across classroom and pull-out settings. Regarding responsibility for implementation, both ECEC and primary school interventions were mostly implemented by classroom teachers, although a considerable number of primary school interventions were also implemented in partnership with other professionals. Importantly, language support and family involvement activities were included in all or most ECEC interventions.

Discussion

In this study we identified and analysed interventions implemented in classroom and school microsystems to ensure equal educational opportunities for children with immigrant, Roma, or low-income background in eight European countries: Czech Republic, England, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and Portugal.

Table 6. Intervention characteristics as a function of level of education.

	ECEC	Primary school	ECEC and primary school	Total
Level of implementation				
National	10	15	8	33
Federal/state/regional	3	6	1	10
Local	4	26	5	35
Implementation scale				
Small	2	14	5	21
Medium	1	10	0	11
Large	5	11	5	21
No information	9	12	4	25
Delivery mode				
Universal	5	20	8	33
Targeted	12	22	5	39
Universal and targeted	0	5	1	6
Setting				
Classroom (embedded)	15	14	7	36
Pull-out (special activity/service)	0	16	4	20
Classroom and pull-out	2	17	3	22
Responsibility for implementation				
Classroom teacher	12	24	5	41
Classroom teacher and other	5	17	8	30
Other	0	6	1	7
Heritage language support	6	15	4	25
Language support	17	32	11	60
Family involvement	13	12	6	31
Total	17	47	14	78

Note. ECEC = Early childhood education and care.

The high number of interventions initially identified suggests a lot is being done to reduce social and educational inequalities in participating countries. However, the persistent and pervasive nature of inequalities may also suggest that different approaches or a more effective combination of existing approaches might be needed to effectively ensure equity and belongingness. Most interventions received some type of funding to ensure the provision of qualified staff, training opportunities, materials, etc. However, the fact that circa 17% did not receive specific funding reminds us that changes in curriculum, pedagogical practices, and/or social climate can be implemented in schools and classrooms without additional resources, by focussing on feasible, sustainable, and inclusive everyday practices that welcome and support all children and their families.

Consistent with our priority criteria, the expected outcomes of selected interventions suggest that language is recognised as the cornerstone of classroom and school interventions aiming to reduce gaps between immigrant/ethnic-minority and native/majority children (OECD 2010), and the main instrument for intercultural communication. While it is possible that language interventions were better documented and, therefore, more easily identified, this cannot be ascertained from our data. Further, these interventions also seemed to acknowledge the importance of non-cognitive skills for school and life success (Heckman 2006), including intercultural competence (Bennett 2017). However, the somewhat low percentage of interventions targeting academic or cognitive skills¹ raises concerns about the much-needed balance in promoting the (interdependent) ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ skills needed for school and lifelong success.

Most interventions were classified as promising. Conversely, a small percentage of interventions were considered effective, based on evidence resulting from high-quality research. This pattern suggests we were successful in identifying less known and understudied interventions, thus maximizing our potential contribution to the field, but it also highlights the need to ensure that evaluation procedures are an intrinsic part of the design and implementation of interventions tackling early social and educational inequalities. High-quality and meaningful data for supporting decisions to improve school inclusiveness should be available in all countries (OECD 2013) and, thus, a change in European tradition seems warranted. This is in line with Aboud et al.’s (2012) recommendation to improve the quality of research designs of interventions aiming to reduce prejudice and enhance inclusion in early childhood.

The comprehensiveness of selected interventions emerged as a relevant pattern, as suggested by several indicators: (1) teacher/staff professional skills and family involvement emerged as expected outcomes in a subset of interventions; (2) a considerable number of interventions addressed more than one target-group; and (3) a considerable number of interventions included a mix of curriculum, pedagogical practices, and social climate approaches. This pattern seems to acknowledge (a) the importance of addressing the needs and participation of relevant actors, such as teachers and the family; (b) (some of) the similar social and educational challenges and opportunities experienced by children with immigrant, Roma, and low-income backgrounds; and the (c) interconnectedness of curriculum, pedagogy, and school social climate. This interconnectedness is also visible on recent findings on family support (Cadima et al. 2017) and professional development (Slot, Romijn, and Wysłowska 2017) interventions. This pattern of comprehensiveness and interconnectedness is consistent with the complex needs of children with

immigrant, Roma, or low-income background, which require competence at multiple levels of the education system and local communities.

Regarding the level of education targeted by selected interventions, it is noteworthy that only one fifth targeted ECEC settings, despite some country differences. This raises the question as to whether some European countries are overlooking social and educational inequalities emerging in early ages or whether ECEC is understood as a compensatory intervention by itself. If the latter is true, the conditions under which ECEC results in improved child outcomes must be carefully and explicitly addressed in educational policies, including equity in access (Ünver et al. 2016) and the provision of high-quality experiences for children with immigrant, minority, or disadvantaged backgrounds (Melhuish et al. 2015). Interestingly, most ECEC interventions were implemented at a national level and delivered in the classroom, by regular teachers, including language support and ensuring family involvement. Based on this pattern, ECEC interventions seem to be widespread, comprehensive, and naturalistic, which can result in increased sustainability and potentiate the positive effects of ECEC on children's future learning and adjustment (Melhuish et al. 2015).

Findings regarding how, where, and by whom interventions were implemented provide important insights. First, it is noteworthy that less than half of these interventions were delivered through universal activities (i.e. activities involving all children). If intergroup contact is important to promote mutual acceptance and reduce prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2011) and key to the development of intercultural sensitivity (Bennett 2017), this finding suggests the promotion of contact is not at the core of the design of most interventions tackling social and educational inequalities. The contact hypothesis of multicultural policies (Berry 1984, 2013) thus seemed to be neglected in most interventions. In addition, almost half of the interventions were implemented in the classroom exclusively, within classroom activities and routines, and most interventions were delivered by classroom teachers, sometimes with the support of other professionals. This pattern suggests that pull-out interventions delivered by specialised professionals are not the rule within interventions aiming to reduce inequalities, although such approaches were also described, especially in primary school. Relatedly, well-established specialised and often intensive interventions through teaching assistants, one-on-one, and small group tuition (Sharples, Webster, and Blatchford 2015; Education Endowment Foundation 2017b, 2017e) were not frequently used, which could be associated with the lower number of interventions targeting academic or cognitive skills.

This pattern suggests that embedded interventions (i.e. interventions within classroom activities by regular teachers) are prioritised, consistent with longstanding recommended practices in early childhood intervention (McWilliam 2010). Furthermore, this pattern highlights the significant role of ECEC and primary education teachers as the actors of social change (Peeters and Sharmahd 2014), key to efforts to reduce inequalities or promote equity and belongingness. Therefore, supporting, training, and providing continued professional development opportunities for all teachers across European schools is key to reducing inequalities experienced by children with immigrant, minority, or low-income background (Slot, Halba, and Romijn 2017). Importantly, professional development is likely needed to increase the effectiveness of teacher-led interventions (Ülger et al. 2018).

Our major findings address how language supports are delivered. Language support activities were included in a considerable percentage of interventions (79%), with all

interventions targeting ECEC including some form of language support. Such activities are based either on explicit supports such as language lessons and reading and writing activities or on implicit supports embedded in classroom activities and routines or delivered within the context of play- or arts-based language-enrichment activities, sometimes extending beyond the classroom and the school. Findings furthermore suggest that either implicit or explicit approaches are typically used, even though immigrant children seem to benefit from combined implicit and explicit language support but not implicit support alone (Stanat et al. 2012).

Importantly, even though over two thirds of interventions targeted immigrant, Roma, or mixed groups of children, less than one third of the interventions included support for or acknowledgement of children's heritage languages. This finding is especially noteworthy as the support for maintenance and development of heritage cultures and languages (Berry 1984, 2013) as well as intercultural communication are key components of multicultural policies. By neglecting the value of children's heritage languages and cultures, interventions possibly hinder their potential to support the development of secure identities in minority or immigrant children and, thus, their potential to positively impact children's psychological and social adaptation (Berry 2013; Nguyen and Benet-Martínez 2013). This can hinder the potential of multicultural policies to fully implement the benefits of Berry's integration and multicultural hypotheses (Berry 1984, 2013). Further, the failure to value and support children's heritage language and culture conveys messages on the implicit value of minority languages (and cultures). These messages may threaten efforts to ensure equal status among all children, a central premise of the contact hypothesis (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006, 2011), thus hindering the potential of these interventions to reduce discriminatory attitudes.

Other findings add to a pattern of limited implementation of multicultural policies, even within effective and promising interventions, namely the reduced number of interventions based on multicultural curricula; the reduced number of interventions explicitly reporting cooperative learning; and the absence of interventions reporting heterogeneous grouping as an intentional strategy to promote positive contact (Berry 2013). Therefore, the tenets of the multiculturalism and integration hypotheses (Berry 1984, 2013) seemed to be generally neglected. In addition, some multicultural curriculum activities relied on didactic approaches based on sharing content on diverse cultures and minority and immigrant groups. The inconsistent effects of such approaches (vs. interactive approaches; Beelmann and Heinemann 2014) should be critically considered, especially because counter-stereotypical information can be potentially distorted, especially by young children, and reinforce stereotypes (Pfeifer, Brown, and Juvonen 2007). As cooperative learning within heterogeneous groups is considered an equity pedagogy (Banks 2015), its infrequent use was unexpected. Meeting the conditions for positive contact, cooperative learning has been consistently associated with increased social skills and academic achievement for all children and decreased prejudice and discrimination (Pfeifer, Brown, and Juvonen 2007; Education Endowment Foundation 2017a, 2017d). Further, we found a residual number of interventions describing interactive anti-bias strategies aiming to address prejudice and discrimination specifically (Bigler 1999; Beelmann and Heinemann 2014). Because multiculturalism, as a policy, requires both support for cultural maintenance and intercultural contact, the features of selected interventions

suggest that there is considerable room for further developing interventions targeting educational equity and belongingness (Aboud et al. 2012).

Finally, explicit family involvement activities were reported for less than half of the interventions. It is noteworthy that most interventions targeting ECEC included explicit family involvement activities but the same did not occur in interventions targeting primary school, which is consistent with extant literature (Murray, McFarland-Piazza, and Harrison 2015). When present, such activities focussed on the promotion of home-school communication and learning at home (Epstein 2011), including activities that valued families' heritage language and culture. However, participatory approaches involving families in decision-making processes seemed to be lacking. Considering the associations between family involvement and student's academic achievement (Fan and Chen 2001; Education Endowment Foundation 2017c), such findings suggest that further development of interventions targeting equity and belongingness may be pursued through family-school partnerships (Epstein 2011), within a democratic and open atmosphere (Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018).

Limitations

This study was informed by our definitions of the core concepts and by the subjective application of selection and priority criteria. National and European representativeness of the selected interventions was not our goal and, therefore, may not be inferred, despite the use of systematic selection and analysis procedures. In addition, we focussed on interventions with documented goals and strategies and, in several cases, published effectiveness data. However, every day, in ECEC and primary schools across participating countries, teachers and other professionals implement a vast array of inclusive practices that focus on welcoming and supporting all children and families and merit acknowledgement, study, and dissemination. Importantly, our choice to examine interventions tackling inequalities does not signal an endorsement of the need for 'different pedagogies' for children with immigrant, minority, or low-income backgrounds (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011) nor does it signal an endorsement of deficit-oriented approaches. Finally, our analysis was based on existent documentation regarding each intervention and not on observations of actual practices nor on the perspectives of key actors involved in design and implementation.

Conclusion and recommendations

In all, our findings suggest that participating countries are testing or implementing a considerable number of diverse and often comprehensive interventions tackling social and educational inequalities through curriculum, pedagogy, and/or social climate. Importantly, language supports seemed to be widespread, appropriately recognising the foundational nature of language skills for learning, communication, and belongingness. However, a theoretically driven critical analysis of effective and promising interventions suggests there is considerable room for further development in the design, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of such interventions. Specifically, comprehensive multicultural policies that explicitly support culture maintenance, communication, and positive contact among minority/disadvantaged and majority/advantaged children, through

equity pedagogies, may be especially valuable in guiding future developments towards designing and implementing inclusive learning environments. Inclusive environments are those that expand what is made available for everyone (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011) and positively impact belongingness, wellbeing, learning, and lifetime success for all children. These developments can become key to achieving progressive universalism, based on the ‘right mix of universal and targeted services’ (Chittleborough et al. 2014, 2248) that focus on individual strengths and not on stigmatised sociocultural belonging.

Important policy recommendations may be extracted from our findings, namely the need to (a) promote continuous professional development opportunities that support ECEC and primary school teachers/professionals in designing and implementing high-quality interventions resulting in inclusive environments; (b) ensure sufficient funding for effectiveness evaluations; (c) prioritise and support high-quality research designs that allow causal inferences on intervention effectiveness; and (d) ensure that national ECEC and primary school curricula consistently reflect multicultural policies (Berry 2013).

Regarding classroom and school practices, our findings suggest the need to (a) value and support all languages (and cultures) equally; (b) promote positive contact through joint learning activities based on positive interdependence (e.g. cooperative learning within heterogeneous groups); (c) use interactive socio-cognitive training approaches to support the development of anti-bias/anti-prejudice attitudes; and (d) support the involvement of all families, namely through active involvement in decision-making processes. These recommendations are consistent with the Council of the European Union Recommendation on High-Quality Early Childhood Education and Care Systems (2019), aiming to contribute to inclusive ECEC services for all children.

Note

1. Language was coded independently and not as an academic or cognitive skill.

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