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Barriers and facilitators for partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC: a review based on empirical research

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ABSTRACT

Partnerships between parents and professionals in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are widely acknowledged as important for children's well-being and learning. For children with immigrant backgrounds, bridges between the different social contexts that surround them are especially significant. The current paper synthesizes research-based knowledge on the barriers to and facilitators of partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC. This overview review includes 25 articles that comprise qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods studies. The most frequently identified barriers include language, asymmetrical power relations and cultural differences and disagreements. This research suggests approaches to facilitate partnerships, such as employing bilingual staff, using translators for parent-teacher conferences when needed, translating materials into different family languages, translanguaging, taking time and showing patience and respect. Finally, to ensure that all parents feel comfortable to express their views, more creative strategies from the professionals might be needed.

Partnerships between parents and professionals[1] in early childhood education and care (ECEC[2]) are widely acknowledged as important for children's well-being, learning and development (Epstein 2018). In Europe, 94% of all children attend ECEC before starting in primary education (Eurostat 2018), and the bridges between the different social contexts that surround a child are crucial for the child's positive development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2007). Family background is a strong predictor of children's educational opportunities (Levels, Dronkers, and Kraaykamp 2008), and in Europe, persistent educational disadvantages are found for immigrant groups (Passaretta and Skopek 2018). Studies have shown that parents with immigrant backgrounds may experience interactions with ECEC-professionals as challenging (Cheatham and Santos 2011). To develop inclusive practices with diverse families in ECEC, there is a need for research-

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based knowledge about the experiences of families with immigrant backgrounds and the professionals who work with them. The current review aims to synthesize the research on the partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC and to identify the barriers to and facilitators of creating inclusive partnerships. This knowledge is a crucial prerequisite to provide better policies and practices to ensure equal educational opportunities for all children in increasingly multicultural European countries. The following research question was posed to address this aim:

> What are the barriers to and facilitators of the partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in early childhood education and care?

In the literature on relationships between parents and professionals, a variety of concepts are used to describe different aspects and the nature of how parents and professionals co-construct children's learning and caregiving environment. The current paper focuses on *parent-professional partnerships*, a designation that can be seen as an extension of parental involvement (Simon and Epstein 2001). The concept of *parental involvement* gained prominence in the 60's (Epstein 1996) and can be described as 'the resources that parents invest in their child's learning experience' (Calzada et al. 2015). However, this concept has been operationalized in several different ways in the literature (Fan and Chen 2001; Carreón, Drake, and Barton 2005). A variety of parental practices has been described as parental involvement, such as parental aspirations for their children's achievement, communication with professionals, communication with their children about ECEC, and involvement in ECEC activities (Fan and Chen 2001). Epstein's (2018) widely used typology of involvement includes parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making and collaborating with the community. The term partnership extends this and focuses on how the two main microsystems in which a child is developing and learning – namely, at home and in ECEC – work together to bridge the contexts, create coherence in children's learning and caregiving environment, and build on each other's resources. The concept of parental involvement often focuses on the role of the parents, whereas parent-professional partnerships expands the focus and assigns equal status to parents and professionals as co-constructors of the child's learning environment. Thus, the term *partnerships* includes involvement, engagement, participation and collaboration (Epstein 2018). To create inclusive partnerships with parents, professionals must know how to communicate with diverse groups of parents in ways that build mutual respect and trust (Epstein 2013). This understanding of partnerships recognizes that the different stakeholders share responsibility for children's learning and development (Simon and Epstein 2001).

The current paper draws on Epstein's (1987) theory of overlapping spheres of influence, which is inspired by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model. Epstein's theory emphasizes a holistic approach where schools, families and communities work closely together and locate the child in the center. The different spheres can either be pushed together or pulled apart by time, characteristics, philosophies or the practices of the family or the school (Epstein 2018). In a partnership, schools create family-like environments, where a child's individuality is recognized. Schools include children and families from diverse backgrounds, and families in these partnerships create school-like families that recognize, encourage and support children's educational paths.

For the purpose of this review, the term *parent-professional partnerships* is used to focus specifically on these two stakeholders' roles in co-constructing young children's learning and caregiving environment. The term *partnerships* is used to emphasize that both partners (parents and professionals) have equal status. The review takes a broad approach towards parent-professional partnerships and focuses on the overlapping spheres between ECEC and the home, including research on involvement, collaboration, communication, engagement and participation.

Studying partnerships across cultures

Currently, for ECEC-professionals in many countries, working with culturally and linguistically diverse families constitutes their everyday practice. This requires extended competence and knowledge (Park and Vandekerckhove 2016) and is considered an inherent part of ECEC professionalism (Nikoloudaki et al. 2018). Nonetheless, many European countries do not have a curriculum that sufficiently prepares professionals to create partnerships with parents form different cultures (Nikoloudaki et al. 2018) and little is known about how European teacher education programs prepares their students for working with families (Willemse et al. 2016). Furthermore, the factors that influence the partnerships between professionals and parents with immigrant backgrounds have not been studied sufficiently (Carreón, Drake, and Barton 2005; Durand 2011). Cultural differences in the nature of relationships between parents and professionals in ECEC – both between and within countries (Hujala et al. 2009) – may result in differences in experiences and expectations towards one another regarding the purpose, content and form of a partnership. Analysis of curricular frameworks for ECEC reveal quite diverse understandings of the concept of parental involvement (Janssen and Vandenbroeck 2018). Teachers have different statuses and roles across countries, and the role of the parents in the partnerships appears to vary (Hujala et al. 2009). As partnerships vary among countries and cultures, immigrant parents will often face expectations from professionals that are different from what they would have expected in the educational system in their home culture. Thus, immigrant parents often face the challenge of navigating both cultural and linguistic codes within the educational system in the host country. Furthermore, immigrants in Europe are at a higher risk of having a lower socioeconomic status (Eurostat 2018), and a substantial amount of evidence suggests that parental socioeconomic status is related to parental involvement in their child's education (Turney and Kao 2009; Calzada et al. 2015; Liu, Zhang, and Jiang 2020). As such, different risk factors seem to be intertwined for many parents with immigrant backgrounds who currently live in Europe. It is therefore necessary to investigate how professionals and parents with immigrant backgrounds experience their partnerships to specifically identify the barriers that immigrant parents face and how professionals can facilitate inclusive partnerships with these parents – pushing these two overlapping spheres together for the benefit of children who often face both cultural and linguistic differences between their two most significant microsystems. The purpose of this review is to create an overview of the existing knowledge on the barriers to and facilitators of partnerships between professionals and parents with immigrant backgrounds in ECEC and to map the areas that still need more research within this field.

Methods

To synthesize the research on the barriers to and facilitators of the partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC, we conducted an overview review (Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou 2016; Krumsvik 2016). An overview review reflects a systematic and comprehensive approach, although it is not exhaustive, and it allows for inclusion of both qualitative and quantitative studies (Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou 2016; Krumsvik 2016). Furthermore, this approach allows for a thematic analysis and a narrative dissemination (Booth, Sutton, and Papaioannou 2016), which suits the purpose of this review and the diversity of the empirical studies that it covers.

Search procedure

The first step in the review process was initial scoping searches, which helped guide and define the scope of the review. This process led to the inclusion and exclusion criteria (see Table 1) and the development of the search terms (see Table 2). As the current paper focuses on early educational partnerships, specifically between professionals and parents with immigrant backgrounds, empirical and peer-reviewed articles on this topic were included. The studies that focus on partnerships in grades where children are older than 8 years were excluded, as the focus of this review is on partnerships in the early years of children's lives, and the nature of educational partnerships often changes with the child's age (Cooper, Lindsay, and Nye 2000). The searches were conducted in the databases of Academic Search Premier and ERIC, as these were considered to cover most journals within the field of education. Due to the rapid changes both within the field of ECEC and in global immigration patterns, we considered up-to-date empirical research on the topic to be most relevant for the purpose of this review, and the timeframe was set to articles published between 2000 and 2018.

In some of the reviewed articles, it was not clearly specified whether the sample consisted of parents with immigrant backgrounds; these articles often used terms such as diverse or multicultural to describe their sample. Thus, for the purpose of this review, we used the home language as an indicator of immigrant background in these articles,

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria.

	Included	Excluded
Databases	Academic Search Premier, ERIC	
Timeframe	2000–2018	Studies published before 2000 and after 2018
Publication type	Online accessible peer-reviewed articles	Text books, gray literature
Focus	Empirical studies, based on qualitative and/or quantitative data that focus on the partnerships between ECEC-professionals and parents from families with immigrant backgrounds	Non-empirical articles, non-peer reviewed articles
Language	English	Other languages
Target population	Articles that focus on staff and/or parents' perspectives and experiences	Articles that focus on teacher education, school leadership, children with special needs, indigenous families
Target teaching level	Kindergarten, preschool, early childhood education and care; children from birth to compulsory school age	Primary school, secondary school, higher education

Table 2. Search terms.

		OR	OR	OR	OR
	Parents	Families	Mothers	Fathers	
AND	Early childhood education	Preschool	Kindergarten	Child care	
AND	Ethnic diversity	Minority	Immigrant		
AND	Staff	Professionals	Teachers	Educators	
AND	Communication	Collaboration	Cooperation	Relationship	Partnership

and we assumed that the groups with a different home language than the majority language, which were also described as diverse or multicultural, were likely to have an immigrant background.

The search procedure was conducted in three stages. The first search stage was conducted in Academic Search Premier and ERIC in the fall of 2018. Different combinations of the search terms (see Table 3) were used. This first search resulted in 143 articles of which 47 were considered to be relevant after reading the titles and abstracts. All 47 articles where then read in full text and evaluated against the inclusion criteria. At this stage, 19 articles met the inclusion criteria. The second stage of searching comprised what Krumsvik (2016) calls the ancestry approach; we used citations from the 19 studies identified in the first stage to find relevant previous studies not identified in the first search stage. In this stage, seven additional articles were included in the review. The last stage comprised hand searches and resulted in one additional article. In a total, 27 articles formed the basis of the quality assessment.

Quality assessment

To assess the quality of the studies that met the inclusion criteria, the trustworthiness of the results was assessed for each article by the two authors independently. This process was guided by predetermined quality criteria (see Table 4). Two sets of quality criteria were applied, which depended on the type of data in the study; one set of criteria was for studies with qualitative data, and one set of criteria was for studies with quantitative data. Different criteria were applied depending on the type of data to acknowledge that research should be assessed with reference to the paradigm and epistemology that frame it (Morrow 2005; Sousa 2014). For the quantitative studies, we assessed *validity, reliability* and *generalizability* (Carrig and Hoyle 2011), and for the qualitative studies, we assessed the *trustworthiness of the method,* the *coherence of the results* (Hill, Thompson, and Williams 1997), and the *transferability and application of the results* (Sousa 2014).

Table 3. Search results.

	Results	Potentially relevant (after reading abstract)	Fulfilled inclusion criteria (after full text reading)	Included in review (after quality assessment)
Academic Search Premier and ERIC	143	47	19	18
Manual search (based on the references in the relevant articles)	15	15	7	6
Hand search		1	1	1
Total	158	62	27	25

Table 4. Quality criteria for quantitative and qualitative studies.

Quantitative (Carrig and Hoyle 2011)	Qualitative (Sousa 2014; Leung 2015)
Validity	Trustworthiness of the method
Reliability	Coherence of the results
Generalizability	Transferability and application of the results

The studies that draw on quantitative methods were assessed by their clear and transparent descriptions regarding validity, reliability and generalizability. For these studies, this meant that we considered whether the instruments and measurements that were used were useful and properly applied (Carrig and Hoyle 2011). Furthermore, researchers should adequately evaluate whether their observed sample is representative of the defined universe (Kane 1996; Carrig and Hoyle 2011). For the studies that draw on qualitative data, the methods were considered to be trustworthy when articles comprised clear and rigorous descriptions of the methodological steps in the research process (Sousa 2014). The methodology had to be appropriate to study the research topic and to answer the research questions. Furthermore, the data should be adequate to investigate the research topic. For the results to be assessed as coherent, the findings and conclusions should be clearly rooted in the data, and the researchers should describe how the material was systematized and analyzed and how they came to their conclusions. Transferability of the results reflects on furthering the knowledge about the subject of the study and generating new theory, new understandings or new perspectives of the phenomenon (Sousa 2014). The applicability of the results should be addressed by the researchers, and they should assess the extent to which the results from their study can be analytically generalized to other situations (Kvale 1996). In total, 25 out of the 27 articles were included in the review after this quality assessment.

Limitations

The current review is not an exhaustive review and therefore does not claim to cover all relevant research articles. Furthermore, the current review only includes articles written in English and is dominated by papers from Anglo-Saxon countries, which might give a skewed picture and should be considered by readers. Arguably, the volume of research on this topic in other languages is larger, and it would have been valuable to include these. Unfortunately, this was not feasible within this project.

Sample description

A variation of methodologies was applied in the 25 articles included in this review. Qualitative methods were used in 15 (60%) of the studies, eight (33%) of the studies used quantitative methods, and the remaining were mixed methods studies. A majority of the studies originated in the US (n = 13, 52%), followed by Europe (n = 7, 28%), with the rest of the studies originating in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Israel. The most researched immigrant group was families with Latino backgrounds who live in the US and Canada (n = 10, 40%), followed by Asian immigrant families in the US, Europe, New Zealand, Israel and Australia (n = 8, 33%). 11 of the included studies investigates the perspectives of the parents on the partnership, and nine studies focus on both

parents and professionals' perspectives or interactions. Three of the included studies focus on professionals, parents and children, and two studies focus on parental involvement and child outcomes.

Results & discussion

The current review investigates the research-based knowledge on the barriers to and facilitators of the partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in early childhood education and care. The results are presented thematically, as the barriers to and facilitators of these partnerships often are intertwined, and they will be discussed in relation to one another. A significant proportion of the reviewed studies indicates that parents with immigrant backgrounds are less involved in their children's education and that they experience more barriers to creating partnerships with professionals than non-immigrant parents (Guo 2005; Huntsinger and Jose 2009; Turney and Kao 2009; Zhang, Keown, and Farruggia 2014). In the US, Chinese-American parents have been shown to be less involved in ECEC activities than European-American parents (Huntsinger and Jose 2009). Immigrant parents in the US were found to be much less likely to be involved in ECEC than native-born parents, even within one ethnic group (Turney and Kao 2009). Turney and Kao (2009) find that Asian and Hispanic immigrant parents particularly faced barriers to ECEC involvement in the US. A similar tendency is found in New Zealand, where Chinese immigrant parents were found to be significantly less involved than non-Chinese parents in all the types of parental involvement that were measured, namely, communication with professionals, volunteering to help in ECEC and participation in decision making (Zhang, Keown, and Farruggia 2014). Accordingly, barriers to creating partnerships with professionals were found for parents with immigrant backgrounds across different countries, continents and immigrant backgrounds (see, e.g. Guo 2005; Huntsinger and Jose 2009; Turney and Kao 2009; Zhang, Keown, and Farruggia 2014). However, the findings further suggest that there are differences in the significance and the nature of the barriers that different immigrant groups experience in ECEC involvement (Calzada et al. 2015).

In several studies, parents with diverse immigrant backgrounds expressed a wish to engage in a partnership with the professionals (Sohn and Wang 2006; Hachfeld et al. 2016; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018). However, these parents experienced a lack of opportunity to communicate with the professionals (Sohn and Wang 2006; Shor 2007; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018). In Germany, immigrant parents reported a stronger need for attunement with the professionals than German-speaking parents, and immigrant parents also rated parent-professional partnerships as more important than German-speaking parents (Hachfeld et al. 2016). However, the professional practices that promote parental involvement are predictive of both ECEC-based involvement (Calzada et al. 2015) and home-based involvement (Chang et al. 2009), which emphasize the importance of developing policies and practices that facilitate inclusive partnerships between educational professionals and parents with immigrant backgrounds. Furthermore, parents' satisfaction with ECEC contact has been found to be associated with family involvement in the US (McWayne, Campos, and Owsianik 2008). McWayne, Campos, and Owsianik (2008) found that parents to a higher degree were involved in ECEC-based activities and home-ECEC conferencing

when they were more satisfied with the contact. For Latino parents in the US, having a Latino teacher for their child was positively related to ECEC-based involvement; however, for Afro-Caribbean parents, ethnic consonance with their child's teacher showed no significant association with parental involvement in ECEC (Calzada et al. 2015).

Accordingly, the reviewed literature reveals a discrepancy between immigrant parents' wish to engage in educational partnerships on the one hand and measured levels of parental involvement, communication or decision making (see Sohn and Wang 2006; Turney and Kao 2009; Hachfeld et al. 2016) on the other hand. Evidently, parents with immigrant backgrounds experience barriers to creating partnerships with professionals, which indicates that there are often factors that pull the two spheres of influence apart. Immigrant parents' strong need for attunement with professionals (see Hachfeld et al. 2016) might indicate that these parents experience attunement with the professionals to a lesser extent, but it could also be caused by larger differences between these spheres for families with immigrant backgrounds and ECEC, which results in a greater need for bridging the contexts for the child. However, professionals' practices and parents' satisfaction with their relationship appear to matter. Not surprisingly, this finding indicates that how professionals meet and communicate with parents is important for promoting partnerships, which affirms the need to identify the specific barriers to creating partnerships and the factors that facilitate equal partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC. In the reviewed literature, the most frequently identified barriers include language, asymmetrical power relations and cultural differences and disagreements, but the research further suggests some approaches to facilitate partnerships and overcome some of the challenges.

Language

Both parents and professionals acknowledge communication as the key to creating partnerships (De Gioia 2015). Thus, language is one of the main themes that emerges in the research on partnerships between parents and professionals in ECEC. Language barriers are the most frequently addressed theme in the research literature and are addressed in 67% of the studies (Guo 2005; Sohn and Wang 2006; McWayne, Campos, and Owsianik 2008; Turney and Kao 2009; Doland and Sherlock 2010; Howard and Lipinoga 2010; Durand 2011; Whitmarsh 2011; Cheatham and Jimenez-Silva 2012; Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013; Durand and Perez 2013; Winterbottom 2013; Heng 2014; Zhang, Keown, and Farruggia 2014; Calzada et al. 2015; Hachfeld et al. 2016). The reviewed studies reveal great variations in parents' language skills in the language of the host country. Some studies even identify language barriers as the most frequent challenge that parents face in their interaction with professionals, regardless of the length of their residency in the host country (Sohn and Wang 2006; Winterbottom 2013). In contrast, Turney and Kao (2009) suggest that minority status might play a greater role than language for immigrant families in the US, as White foreign-born parents were found to become more comfortable interacting with professionals as their English language ability became better. Moreover, this benefit was weaker for immigrants with Hispanic and Asian backgrounds. For many immigrants, however, these factors are intertwined, which demonstrates the complexity of the barriers that many immigrant families experience.

To facilitate communication and ease language barriers, professionals use several strategies. Bilingual educators and staff members were found to be consciously employed to help children and families in a number of studies (e.g. Heng 2014; De Gioia 2015). The use of translators in parent-teacher conferences appears to vary; some studies find that translators are used systematically (Howard and Lipinoga 2010; Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013; Heng 2014), while other studies show that parents who experience language barriers are not provided any interpreter services (Sohn and Wang 2006; Turney and Kao 2009). Furthermore, signs, materials and newsletters translated into the home languages are provided by some ECEC centers to ease language barriers (Howard and Lipinoga 2010; Whitmarsh 2011).

Bilingual staff and resources in the families' home language are often regarded as the best practice in the work with families with immigrant backgrounds (Whitmarsh 2011). However, as there might be more languages represented in one setting than there are staff, it might be difficult to accommodate all languages equally. Whitmarsh (2011) found that the resources in the majority language in the settings (in her study, Farsi), contributed to a feeling of neglect for mothers who spoke other languages. For the parents who could not draw any benefits from the bilingual staff, some even perceived this as a disadvantage for their children, as they wanted their children to learn English from native English speakers, and the English spoken by the bilingual staff was not perceived as 'good English' (Whitmarsh 2011).

Even parents who have become relatively fluent speakers of the language of the host country experience language barriers due to challenges with the educational language and specialized terms (Sohn and Wang 2006; Howard and Lipinoga 2010). These parents often do not have first-hand experiences with the educational system of the host country, and this might add to the difficulties of decoding the meaning of the specialized educational language, which constitutes a double language barrier for parents with immigrant backgrounds. Thus, to allow time for clarifications, second language speakers might need more time allotted for parent-teacher conferences than native speakers who are familiar with the contextual language. Korean mothers in the US expressed that the time allotted for conferences was too limited and that the time in the daily situations was not sufficient to communicate with the professionals (Sohn and Wang 2006), which led to a lack of opportunities for the mothers to communicate with the professionals.

Another notable finding across the studies is that parents with immigrant backgrounds experience a lack of sensitiveness and patience from professionals in regard to language. In Sohn and Wang's (2006) study, a Korean mother living in the US expressed that 'teachers tend to regard non-English speakers as unintelligent people.' Sohn and Wang (2006) ascertain that mothers experience professionals as quite impatient and irritated when they do not understand the immigrant mothers' English. In Whitmarsh's (2011) study, this is illustrated by an experience of a higher educated immigrant mother who had asked a professional about a pronunciation in the English alphabet that she needed to help her child with homework and was met with this response, 'But you *must* know how to do it. You *must* know the alphabet.' This experience added to this mother's feeling of marginalization and led to her decision to never meet with her child`s teacher again (Whitmarsh 2011). Heng's (2014) findings also support this and suggest that professionals interact differently with parents depending on their

economic-cultural-linguistic capital. The professionals in Heng's (2014) study took more initiative and were more welcoming towards parents who were more familiar with the middle-class American culture than most of the Chinese immigrant parents. The professionals in this study mostly communicated in a one-directional and didactic way, for example, giving parents instructions and informing them about appropriate behavior and rules (Heng 2014).

In the ethnographic study of a multilingual classroom in France, Mary and Young (2017) found that the teacher used translanguaging to scaffold children's learning and to create bridges between ECEC and the home. Translanguaging refers to the systematic use of two languages for schooling (Mary and Young 2017). In this study, the professional invited the parents into the classroom to create safe spaces for both children and parents. This opportunity was used to establish contact with the parents and to ask questions about their home language(s). The professional was a native French speaker, who spoke no other languages fluently, but who after years of experience with bilingual Turkish-speaking children, had acquired the skills to support children through translanguaging. This study exemplifies how monolingual professionals can work to foster well-being, learning and inclusion for multilingual children and their parents in their classrooms.

Finally, a communication barrier that emerged from the reviewed studies is indirectly related to language via the children. Some studies suggest that as children sometimes get frustrated in the process of learning their second language in ECEC, parents often experience a lack of understanding from professionals, and this can lead to challenges in their relationship from the parents' perspective (Shor 2007; Whitmarsh 2011). In Shor's (2007) study, approximately one-quarter of the respondents experienced conflicts with professionals related to what they perceived as a lack of consideration of immigration-related factors, such as language.

Obviously, communication plays a pivotal role in a partnership, and the various language barriers that parents with immigrant backgrounds experience should be acknowledged. The literature manifests diverse forms of language-related barriers, even for parents with longer residence in the host country. The reviewed literature also reveals that the professionals apply a variety of strategies to overcome language barriers and facilitate communication. Accordingly, promising practices include employing bilingual staff, using translators for parent-teacher conferences when needed, translating materials into different family languages, translanguaging, taking time and showing patience and respect. However, there is a need to be cautious about the balance between the materials and staff provided to aid barriers in the different languages represented in a classroom to avoid reinforcing the feeling of being a minority (even among other minorities). Furthermore, parents are often concerned about their child learning the national language of the host country fluently, which might constitute a dilemma for some ECEC leaders, as bilingual staff are often not native speakers of the language of the host country, and in these cases, different benefits must be balanced with one another. Lastly, the literature shows the importance of remembering that even for quite fluent speakers of the language of the host country, specialized educational language might constitute a double language barrier.

Asymmetrical power relations

Asymmetrical power in the relationship between parents and professionals emerges as a barrier to creating partnerships across several of the studies in this review (Guo 2005; Vandenbroeck, Roets, and Snoeck 2009; Howard and Lipinoga 2010; Whitmarsh 2011; Cheatham and Jimenez-Silva 2012; Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013; Heng 2014; Van Laere, Van Houtte, and Vandenbroeck 2018). This asymmetry often appears as a perception of the professionals as experts, a view that is expressed by both parents and the professionals themselves (Guo 2005; Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013). In a parent-teacher conference setting, Cheatham and Jimenez-Silva (2012) found that the teacher and the teacher's assistant spoke over 80% of the words in the conference, and the authors argue that this implies partnership difficulties. Furthermore, Cheatham and Ostrosky (2013) comparison of parent-teacher conferences between native Spanish-speaking, Latino bilingual and native English-speaking parents in the US reveal that the professionals spoke the most and asked least often for the parents' goals for their children during the conferences with the native Spanish-speaking parents compared to the native English speakers and Latino bilingual parents. Both parents and professionals in this study expressed that they viewed the professional's role as the expert (Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013). Howard and Lipinoga (2010) emphasize that the institutional encounters between the professionals and parents involve an asymmetry of expertise. They note that immigrant parents have unequal familiarity with the genre of parent-teacher conferences, an important arena for the creation of partnerships between parents and professionals. This unequal familiarity with the parent-teacher conference genre may manifest unequal access to power and might result in misunderstandings (Howard and Lipinoga 2010).

Whitmarsh's (2011) interviews with asylum-seeking mothers in the UK revealed that they view the professionals as experts in educational matters and that their role as mothers includes preparing the child for ECEC. Whitmarsh (2011) claims that this is inhibiting of partnerships and emphasizes that the notion of the professionals as experts appears to be a cross-cultural conception. Although the notion of the professionals as experts might be found across cultures, the nature of how this is manifested in the dynamic of the relationships might be more culture-specific. Consistent with previous findings, Durand and Perez (2013) notice that in the US, Latino parents question professionals about their practices, advocate for certain issues or ask for clarifications to a lesser extent than White parents with a higher socioeconomic background. In Guo's (2005) study from New Zealand, the Asian immigrant parents either express that they do not want to collaborate with the professionals or that they do not know how to take an active role in ECEC settings. One informant expresses it like this: 'I would like to do something but don't think I can contribute too much' (Guo 2005). In contrast, the professionals describe the Asian immigrant parents as 'respectful, interested but passive,' and the professionals do not feel confident in working with the Asian immigrant parents (Guo 2005). Furthermore, the professionals express that time constraints are an obstacle for spending time with the Asian immigrant parents.

Evidently, both parents and professionals often appear to view the professional as the expert, and the experienced asymmetrical power in relationships between parents and professionals is viewed by several researchers as problematic for building partnerships.

Drawing on the understanding that educational partnerships are based on an equal status between parents and professionals as co-constructors of children's learning and caregiving environment, asymmetrical power within these relationships is problematic. Although most of the studies find asymmetrical power relationships to be a barrier in creating partnerships between parents and professionals in ECEC, there are also other approaches to this topic. As one of the informants in Vandenbroeck, Roets, and Snoeck's (2009, 208) study mentions, 'different "expertise" does not necessarily imply a hierarchy of knowledges.' Vandenbroeck, Roets, and Snoeck (2009) emphasize that it is possible for professionals to respect and embrace the perspectives of parents without fully understanding them, and they thus advocate that 'good practice' cannot be essentialized. Emphasizing the difference in expertise between parents and professionals might be a fruitful approach, as they both bring important perspectives and experiences from different areas of children's lives into their conversation with each other.

Culture and disagreements

In the reviewed studies, disagreements between parents and professionals appeared in relation to several topics, such as discipline (Shor 2007; Bernhard et al. 2004), pedagogy and practice (De Gioia 2015) and educational goal setting (Cheatham and Ostrosky 2013; Döge and Keller 2014). Disagreements by themselves might not necessarily hinder partnerships, but disagreements require trust and communication to be resolved. Parents with immigrant backgrounds largely seem to be hesitant to approach disagreements with professionals in a confronting manner, and this finding seems to be evident across different immigrant groups, such as Chinese (Heng 2014), Korean (Sohn and Wang 2006), and Latino (Howard and Lipinoga 2010) immigrant groups.

Disagreements regarding professionals' approaches to discipline is found among parents with immigrant backgrounds (Bernhard et al. 2004; Shor 2007). However, the topics of the disagreements seem to be more culture-specific. In Bernhard et al.'s (2004) study on the perceptions on discipline of Latino parents living in the US, the findings suggest that parents perceived professionals as overly bureaucratic and impersonal. They reported that children were punished for what parents perceived as minor offences and that professionals comply with absolute rules and regulations, without them seeming to be interested in the child as a person (Bernhard et al. 2004). In contrast, immigrant parents from the former Soviet Union (FSU) living in Israel felt that professionals were too tolerant of misbehavior (Shor 2007). Common for both groups, however, was that parents expressed disagreement with professionals when children were expelled or suspended from ECEC (Bernhard et al. 2004; Shor 2007). Parents felt that this was a punishment that did not consider the child's learning and academic future (Bernhard et al. 2004; Shor 2007).

In a study of Chinese immigrant parents living in the US, Heng (2014) finds that parents downplay their own needs, often to avoid conflict and maintain harmony. On the occasions that the parents had approached staff, they indicated disappointment with the follow-ups from ECEC and thus perceived little point in expressing their feedback. Parents further mentioned that differences between ECEC in China and the US make it difficult for them to know what to expect and, thus, how to react. The lack of dialogue between the Chinese immigrant parents and the professionals results in

assumptions among professionals that the Chinese immigrant parents 'Don't know' or even 'Don't care' (Heng 2014). Sohn and Wang (2006) found that cultural differences between Korean and American ECEC made the notion of equal partnerships between Korean mothers and the professionals challenging. The Korean mothers were hesitant about asking for clarifications or voicing their own opinions to the professionals. Although they have opinions about their child's education, they often keep these opinions to themselves as a demonstration of respect for the professionals' authority (Sohn and Wang 2006). The Korean mothers acknowledged that they were listened to by the professionals, but as one mother noted, this made her confused about her 'role and attitude towards teachers in American schools and sometimes it makes me uncomfortable' (Sohn and Wang 2006, 129). Furthermore, ECEC visits, which are often used as an indicator of involvement, are not encouraged as much in Korea as in the US. Thus, the cultural differences seem to equip the professionals and the immigrant parents with rather different expectations towards one another.

Despite the different nature of the disagreements that parents with immigrant backgrounds experience with professionals, the role of the professional as the expert appear to inhibit parents from expressing their opinions to the professionals. The asymmetric power relations between parents and professionals seem to add to the difficulties in creating partnerships based on equality between both parties. However, this might not always be visible to the professionals, as parents might appear to be polite and satisfied. Thus, there might be a need for more creative strategies from the professionals to ensure that all parents feel comfortable to express their views.

Summary and conclusions

This paper investigates the barriers to and facilitators of the partnerships between parents with immigrant backgrounds and professionals in ECEC. For many young children in Europe currently, family and ECEC constitute the two most significant microsystems in their lives, and parents and professionals play pivotal roles as co-constructors of children's learning and caregiving environment. For immigrant children, cultural and linguistic differences between the microsystems might be of greater significance than for children without an immigrant background. These children will often need to develop diverse linguistic and cultural competence within two or even more contexts, which means that their support needs to exceed what parents or professionals can sufficiently provide on their own. Therefore, bridging the different contexts and moving the different spheres of influence together is essential; thus, creating partnerships with all parents is an imperative task for professionals in ECEC. To develop inclusive partnership practices, knowledge about the specific barriers that immigrant parents face – and about promising practices to facilitate partnerships – are crucial.

Overall, the barriers that parents with immigrant backgrounds are facing in their relationships with their children's ECEC professionals are complex and intertwined. Immigrant parents express a strong wish to communicate and to be attuned with the professionals. Moreover, the literature clearly indicates that the professionals' practices that include parents matter. However, as Epstein (2018) argues, the two spheres of influence might be pulled apart by different characteristics, philosophies and practices. For parents with immigrant backgrounds and ECEC professionals, the main factors responsible for

this pulling apart are related to language, asymmetrical power relations, culture and disagreements. From a partnership perspective, the asymmetry that is often found in relationships between parents and professionals is particularly worrisome. Equality and shared responsibility are key in partnerships (Epstein 2018), and an imbalance in power between parents and professionals may inhibit parents from participation and from voicing their opinions. Furthermore, professionals might lack the potential benefits provided by the combined efforts and shared educational goals between both parties. Both parents and professionals have experiences with the child that the other party does not possess, and acknowledging each other as significant resources in the child's life is arguably fruitful. Several strategies to facilitate partnerships have been emphasized, and the most common strategy for most of them appears to be understanding that partnerships take time, effort and patience.

The theoretical notion of *partnerships* between parents and professionals based on the equality between the partners is not new (see, e.g. Epstein 1996). Nevertheless, the research on partnerships between immigrant parents and professionals in ECEC still often revolves around parents and parental involvement (Heng 2014) and focuses on parents' characteristics and experiences rather than considering both perspectives equally. This focus is also evident in the current review. All of the studies in this review include data from parents in one form or another, whereas only approximately half of the studies (13) include data from the professionals. Assuming the importance of equal status in partnerships, this skewed focus in the research literature might be unfortunate. Considering the professionals' responsibility to facilitate partnerships, more knowledge is needed about what types of characteristics among professionals are associated with the ability to successfully create partnerships with parents with immigrant backgrounds. Furthermore, insights in the experiences of professionals who work with immigrant parents and their potential needs for professional development are useful topics for further investigation within this field. Lastly, only a few of the studies included in this review are experimental, which implies that there is still a lack of knowledge about the causal inferences within this field. Thus, we suggest a need for more research that provides knowledge about promising professional practices, the effects of interventions and professional development.

The current review has implications for several academic areas. In terms of professional training and development, the knowledge gained should be included in the pre- and in-service programs that prepare professionals for their work in increasingly hyper-diverse ECEC institutions. Furthermore, future research should include parental and professional perspectives to the same extent. Finally, intervention studies that apply various research designs, from design research to RCT studies, would be highly beneficial to provide context-sensitive knowledge about how to prevent and overcome the barriers to and developing facilitators of the partnerships between parents and professionals to the benefit of children's well-being and learning.

Notes

1. In this paper, professionals will be used to describe the staff who works directly with children in early childhood education and care.

2. In this article, early childhood education and care (ECEC) denotes all types of institutionalized education and care provided for children from birth to compulsory school age.

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