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Jørgensen, Clara; Dobson, Graeme; Perry, Tom

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Migrant children with Special Educational Needs in European Schools – a review of current issues and approaches

Clara Rübner Jørgensen^{a*}, Graeme Dobson^a and Thomas Perry^b

^aDepartment for Disability Inclusion and Special Needs, University of Birmingham, Birmingham UK; ^bDepartment of Teacher Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham UK.

*Corresponding author: c.joergensen@bham.ac.uk, Orchid: 0000-0001-8387-4819

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Abstract

This paper presents findings from an exploratory review of the literature on school approaches and current issues within European schools in relation to migrant children with SEN. 13 papers were identified and analysed and three key ‘journeys’ reflecting the developing and negotiated nature of family and school experiences and practices were identified: the family journey, the school journey and the journey into SEN. The findings emphasise the importance of professionals acknowledging cultural and individual diversity, not only by considering the cultural backgrounds of migrants, but also by critically understanding their own cultural framework and how they use it in their work with families. The review provides a useful reference for future research in this area and for professionals working with diverse communities, by highlighting common practices to be aware of, and by providing evidence that more training is needed of school staff in how to manage and understand migration and diversity in relation to children with SEN.

Keywords: special educational needs, migrant children, diversity, school approaches, Europe.

Introduction

Migrant children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are an overlooked group in research, policy and practice, and not much is known about their particular support needs or any

specific issues they may face in school. Migrant children are a highly diverse group, which includes children who may have migrated for economic reasons or fled their country of origin as a result of conflict and may have migrated with their parent(s), family members or unaccompanied. While the term ‘migrant children’ is sometimes used to describe both first and second generation migrants, in this paper we draw on a definition of migrant children which includes only those who themselves have moved. According to international figures, 5.65 million European school children are foreign-born (UNHRC et al., 2019) and first generation migrant children currently constitute around four percent of the under-15 population in Europe (Janta and Harte, 2017). Their education is shaped by their varied socio-cultural and economic backgrounds, language abilities, experiences of education in their country of origin, and the way they are perceived by teachers and peers (Eurydice, 2019). Common challenges experienced by migrant children include having to settle into an unfamiliar educational system, learning a new language, making friends, understanding the culture and curriculum of the school and encountering discrimination and/or racism (Hamilton, 2013; Jørgensen, 2017; Ryan et al., 2010). These challenges are likely to be exacerbated if the child also has SEN, although much depends on the particular situation, setting and special educational need of the child.

Children with SEN are similarly a very broad group, which includes many different types of needs. SEN categories are complex, fluid and socially constructed (Gillborn, 2017; Paniagua, 2015) and there is no common European agreement on identification and categories (Riddell et al. 2012). Illustrating the lack of a common framework, the proportion of children identified as having an official decision of SEN range from 1.1% to 20.5% across European countries (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). Further complicating the picture are the facts that many children receive support for SEN without having an official diagnosis and that minority ethnic groups are often over-represented

internationally within SEN provision (Artiles, 2017; Connor et al., 2019; Gabel et al., 2009; Lindsay et al., 2006).

Data on migration and SEN are seldom matched and therefore it is not possible to provide any precise figures on the amount of migrant children who *also* have SEN. A simple combination of the above separate figures for migrant children and children with SEN, indicates that migrant children with SEN form a substantial group within European schools. However, in contrast to the extensive attention and debate pertaining to migrant children and similarly to children with SEN, migrant children who *also* have SEN are a neglected and overlooked group in research, policy and practice (Caldin, 2014; Oliver and Singal, 2017; Pisani and Grech, 2015). The lack of attention to the intersection between migration and SEN presents a significant gap, not only given the likely number of migrant children with SEN and the need to understand their particular experiences, but also given some of the documented practices which result in migrant children being mis-diagnosed and/or overrepresented within SEN provision and the implications this may have for the children's educational experiences (Berhanu and Dyson, 2012; Underwood, 2012).

In this paper, we present findings from a literature review, which begins to address this gap by collating research findings about school approaches and current issues experienced within European schools in relation to migrant children with SEN. The literature review formed the first stage of a research project which explored the type of information British schools need in order to support migrant children with SEN and how such information can best be obtained, given the cultural complexity of SEN and the current UK political climate in relation to migrants. To understand these questions in context and enable a comparative basis for the project, an exploratory review of the academic literature on migrant children with SEN in Europe was carried out in Autumn 2019. As the review will show, the

very limited existing literature on the topic highlights that the intersection between migration and SEN needs to be understood both in its national context – considering varied migration tradition, cultural and linguistic diversity and country specific approaches to SEN – but also in comparison, allowing cross-national issues and patterns to be identified. In the following, we outline the methods used to carry out the review; present and discuss its main findings, paying attention to both country-specific and cross-national themes; and, finally, consider implications for further research and practice across Europe.

Methods

For the review, an initial search of the literature was conducted in Google Scholar, with the use of all combinations of first; migrant, immigrant and refugee, and second; SEN, SEND and disability. These were combined with ‘child’ to locate children specifically. Inclusion criteria were that the papers had to be published after 2000, be peer reviewed, written in English, based on research conducted (at least partially) in Europe, be about school-aged children, and at least to some extent discuss educational issues or approaches. This initial search led to the identification of 18 papers, 12 of which were found to fit the inclusion criteria upon closer reading. The 6 remaining papers were excluded on the basis that they were either not about education, not from Europe or did not consider SEN.

Some of the studies identified through this initial search used different definitions of migrant children than the one defined for our study, as they included both first and second generation migrants. Consequently, we decided to add as an inclusion criteria that papers had to include first generation migrant children, at least partially. However, studies which used a completely different terminology (e.g. ethnicity) were excluded on the basis that there was no way to distinguish first generation migrants from more settled minority ethnic children. Some

of the papers discussed migrant students more broadly, but had a sub-section on migrant students with SEN. These papers were included, but only the section on migrant children with SEN was used for the analysis. Finally, some of the papers also addressed the issue of overrepresentation of migrant children in SEN provision, and thus discussed the situation of migrant children who may not have had SEN but were still defined as such by the schools they attended. Due to the impossibility of separating these two groups based on the papers alone, and because the papers themselves described some ambivalence, these papers were included in the review.

Following the Google Scholar search, a number of relevant journals were searched directly, including: Migration Studies, Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies, International Migration, International Migration Review, Disability and Society, Journal of Migration and Human Security, International Journal of Inclusive Education, Comparative Migration Studies, European Journal of Special Needs Education, and Race, Ethnicity and Education. In addition, a secondary search was conducted by sifting through the references of identified papers and looking at author profiles. A number of seemingly relevant papers were identified through this process, but were excluded upon closer reading, as they either did not fit the extended inclusion criteria or were not in English. This secondary search thus only resulted in the identification of one additional relevant paper.

Finally, to add to the rigour of the search and make sure no papers were overlooked, we conducted a search in two major search engines: Web of Science and ERIC, using the same search terms as in the original Google Scholar search. This process resulted in the identification of an additional four potentially relevant papers, but again these were all excluded after having read them in full, as they did not fit the inclusion criteria.

In summary, a total of 13 papers which met the inclusion criteria were identified. All 13 papers were read by two of the authors on the paper, who conducted a joint thematic

analysis in NVivo. This process involved reading through the papers, discussing themes as they occurred, and coding all papers, first using initial codes and later more refined codes, finally resulting in the analytical framework presented below.

Findings

With only 13 papers meeting the inclusion criteria, our first finding is that there is currently very little research conducted in Europe about migrant children with SEN. Moreover, the 13 papers identified represented a limited number of European countries ($n=5$) and some were written by the same authors using material from one specific project. What follows is therefore a necessarily broad and exploratory account of the topic, brought together from reading across the small number of studies in this area.

The papers were mostly qualitative, focusing on a specific school, area and/or migrant group, and the majority of research participants were either professionals or parents, with very little attention being paid to the children's perspective. Only eight of the papers were specifically about migrants and SEN. The remainder either described the education of migrants more generally but had a sub-section or some consideration of migrant children with SEN or, as described above, discussed migrant children potentially misplaced in SEN provision. For a full outline of the 13 papers, the terminology used and the groups included, see Table 1.

The themes identified in the initial NVivo coding of the papers were grouped under three main headings: Family, School and SEN. A closer reading of the coded text made it clear that within all of these three groups, the experiences of research participants were in constant development and (re)negotiation as a result of the multi-faceted 'journeys' they were on – between and across countries, schooling systems, educational approaches, SEN

assessment systems and in relation to one another. This provided the background for the framework used to analyse the findings from the review, focusing on three types of ‘journeys’: ‘Family journeys’, ‘School journeys’ and ‘Journeys into SEN’ as overarching themes. As the sub-themes within each illustrate, these were not completely separate. Furthermore, much of the information provided, also within the theme of ‘Family journeys’ derived from school professionals and thus presented a particular perspective on the families. To allow for a critical discussion of perspectives emerging in all of the three journeys, in the following we have sought to provide sufficient context from the papers as well as comparative and critical comments from their authors. In our presentation of findings, we use the same categories as the authors, e.g. refugees and asylum seekers, although these constitute sub-categories of the general category of migrants investigated in this review.

Table 1. Selected papers

Author	Topic	Study country	Participants	Methods	Specific focus on SEN?
Caldin 2014	Migrant disabled students and the Italian school system	Italy (Emilia Romagna region)	schools, parent, pupils, organisations and services	Questionnaires interviews and focus groups	Yes
Caldin and Cinotti 2018	Migrant families with disabilities and the Italian school system	Italy (Emilia Romagna region)	Same as above	Same as above	Yes
Gabel et al. 2009	Migration and ethnic group disproportionality in special education	New Zealand, US, British Columbia, Germany	n/a	Secondary quantitative data analysis	Yes
Hamilton 2013	Inclusion of migrant worker children in a rural primary school	UK (rural Wales)	40 Eastern European migrant children (aged 3-11, 22 males and 18 females), 14 teachers/practitioners, 9 Eastern European parents and 6 community practitioners	Interviews, open-ended questionnaires, observation, documentary analysis.	No
Madziva and Thondlana 2017	Provision of quality education in the context of Syrian refugee children in the UK	UK	Eight Syrian families (16 adults and 15 children [aged 7–21]). 26 other participants: school teachers, council authorities, representatives of faith-based and migrant support organisations, members of the Syrian society.	Interviews	No
Mcintyre and Hall 2018	Barriers to the inclusion of refugee and asylum seeking children in schools in England	UK	4 head teachers	Interviews	No
Migliarini 2018	Inclusion discourses of Italian professionals in educational, health and social services for refugees in Rome.	Italy (Rome)	17 professional participants in the area of education, health care and social assistance, 10 asylum-seeking and refugee children (mostly from sub-Saharan West African countries)	Semi-structured interviews	Yes and No

Migliarini et al 2018	SEN Policies and migrant children in Italian schools	Italy	n/a	Documentary Policy Analysis of 10 school development plans for inclusion	Yes and No
Migliarini et al 2019	The impact of the Salamanca Statement on the inclusion of migrant children with SEN	Italy and the USA	Italy: as in Migliarini 2018	Italy: as in Migliarini 2018	Yes and No
Oliver and Singal 2017	The perspectives of staff and new migrants at a special school	UK (England)	Members of staff at the school (male head teacher, female deputy head teacher and another male teacher, three female TAs), four migrant parents of children (two girls and two boys) with physical and learning disabilities.	Semi-structured interviews	Yes
Paniagua 2015	The participation of immigrant families with children with SEN in schools	Spain (Cataluña)	23 families (6 Catalan and 17 migrant) of children, who had been identified as having autism, mild mental retardation, behavioural problems and other learning difficulties and 19 professionals – mostly Special Education teachers and tutors.	Interviews and observations	Yes
Paniagua 2017	The exclusion of linguistically, culturally and socio-economically diverse families labelled as having SEN	Spain (Cataluña)	Same as above	Participant observation, Formal interviews and conversations with teachers	Yes
Sinkkonen and Kyttälä 2014	Experiences of Finnish teachers working with immigrant students	Finland	Nine Finnish teachers working with immigrant students (teaching Finnish language).	Interviews	No

Theme 1: Family Journeys

The journey of migrant families from home country to country of residence was described in several of the papers as having an impact on the education of migrant children with SEN. Four interrelated sub-themes were identified within this overarching theme: 1) family perceptions of disability and inclusion, 2) family expectations and understanding of the educational system, 3) communication and collaboration between families and schools, and 4) access to support networks.

Family Perceptions of Disability and Inclusion

Differences between home and settlement country in relation disability and inclusion were highlighted in several of the papers as having an important impact on the way migrant parents of children with SEN interacted with education. On the one hand, having a child with a disability was mentioned as one possible reason that migrant families had chosen to leave their country of origin (Oliver and Singal, 2017); on the other, perceptions of SEN in their country of origin affected parents' views of disability and inclusion (Caldin and Cinotti, 2018). This was well-illustrated in Hamilton's (2013) study of Eastern European migrant parents in a rural school in Wales, where she quoted an English as Additional Language (EAL) teacher who described a migrant mother's relief when finding out that the purpose of the meeting she had been called to was to support her child (who had been in the process of being statemented before migration), rather than excluding her because she 'wasn't bright enough'. Similarly, other studies showed that experiences from country of origin could lead to misconceptions about educational inclusion, and consequently affect the extent to which parents were willing to share information about their children (Hamilton, 2013).

Family Expectations and Understanding of the Educational System

Several papers emphasised the role of the school as a central agency for migrant children and their families. They showed that schools play a supportive role, not only for education, but also for inclusion more broadly, as they may act as ‘hubs’ or a ‘first port of call’ for families accessing the complex system of services available for their disabled children (Caldin, 2014; Oliver and Singal, 2017). However, the reviewed papers also illustrated that the school was an arena susceptible to misunderstandings, at least in the early stages after migration (Oliver and Singal, 2017). In the UK, where children begin schooling earlier than in many of countries of origin of migrants, the lack of previous schooling was mentioned as an issue for schools (Hamilton, 2013; Oliver and Singal, 2017). In addition, disrupted schooling due to migration and the lack of information following the children was mentioned by the teachers in Oliver and Singal’s (2017) study who found that it ‘complicated their assessments of children, disrupting standardised, official procedures and creating different challenges as the children settled into school’ (p. 1222). Disrupted schooling of migrant children was also discussed by Migliarini (2018) in the Italian context, but her main argument in this regard was that Italian professionals had a deficit perception of any previous schooling of migrant students, due to the Eurocentric school curriculum and system within which they worked.

Home-school Communication

Lack of proficiency in the school language was mentioned in almost all the reviewed articles as a factor, which complicated communication between migrant parents and schools, and made it difficult for parents to navigate the educational system. Paniagua (2017) and Caldin (2014) described how migrant families did not always understand the

teachers or the training and interventions suggested for their children. Oliver and Singal (2017) discussed the benefits of employing linguistically and ethnically diverse migrant support staff to facilitate individualised communication and smooth home–school relations. The teachers in their study also noted that they ‘had to recognise wider family contexts, such as transnational caring arrangements and precarious employment situations which impacted on the children’s care and education’ and the parents’ ability to get involved in school (p. 1222).

School-home collaboration

Trust, communication and relationship between families and schools were described as crucial in several of the studies (Caldin, 2014; Madziva and Thondhlana, 2017) and the involvement of parents in schools was seen by teachers in the reported studies as a key way to support the children (Caldin and Cinotti, 2018). Teachers however often put the blame for lack of involvement on parents, as exemplified in a quote from Caldin’s (2014) study:

I think very often it is the family that causes the obstacle: partly because they don’t take part in class initiatives, even the families of non-disabled migrant children. They generally tend to not participate, perhaps frequenting their own ethnic groups more, and clearly this hinders inclusion. (Teacher, quoted in: Caldin 2014, p. 113)

Describing a similar deficit approach to parents, Paniagua (2015) described how the teachers in the Spanish school settings he studied ‘held unrealistic demands on parents and sometimes raised contradictory claims about how they should help their children’ (p. 58). The migrant parents in his study were described as generally positive about

involvement, but either did not have the resources or did not understand the teachers or the interventions prescribed for their children. Furthermore, teachers' expectations often evolved around an ideal template of middle-class parenting which positioned migrant families as 'deprived' and 'not able' and thus shifted responsibility away from schools.

Access to Support Networks:

The migration journey of families often involves leaving established support networks behind and, as described by Caldin (2014), migrant families who have children with SEN experience a 'two-fold source of stress' derived from the disability diagnosis and their migration. The result is often a reduction in the families' formal and informal social networks, which in turn impacts on the inclusion process of the children (Paniagua, 2015). Both Paniagua (2015) and Caldin (2014) noted that even though disabled people's associations could provide a valuable source of support, migrant families rarely had contact with such associations. The reason for this was partly described as practical, for example due to work obligations, but Caldin (2014) also pointed to cultural misconceptions amongst staff at such organisations. She suggested that ethnic associations should be more widely involved in issues relating to disability and inclusion, rather than assuming that migrant families already have a large social network through compatriots or relatives, which they can draw on for support. Acknowledging the practical challenges experienced by some families, Caldin and Cinotti (2018) furthermore recommended implementing and strengthening home care services for families with children with disabilities.

Theme 2: School Journeys

Similar to migrant families of children with SEN, whose journey from one country to another involved a number of shifts in perceptions of disability, education and inclusion, the schools described in the reviewed papers were on a ‘journey’ of their own. This involved getting used to an increasingly multicultural school population and setting up culturally sensitive assessment and referral systems, but also responding to general educational developments, including for example an increased focus on performance and centrally defined curricular standards, which in turn impacted on migrant children with SEN. Within the overarching theme of school journeys, three sub-themes were identified reflecting different aspects of this journey: 1) multicultural understanding and readiness, 2) school approaches to SEN and 3) the education system.

Multi-cultural Understanding and Readiness

The schools described in the reviewed papers had different experiences of diversity and multiculturalism, due to the different extent and timing of migration into their respective countries. In Finland – a country with relatively recent experience of migration – Sinkkonen and Kyttälä (2014) described how schools had not yet adjusted to dealing with multicultural issues, but were increasingly aware of the need to understand and pay attention to these within the classroom and in teacher education. They also emphasised that there were differences between districts, where migrant populations had had a longer presence and that younger generations of teachers seemed to have a more open mind about cultural diversity and integration in schools. Similarly, Migliarini (2018) and Paniagua (2017) noted the increasingly diverse intake of schools in Italy and Spain, and showed how the perceptions of teachers may affect migrant children in terms of assessment and SEN provision. Migliarini (2018) describes what she calls the

‘SENitization’ of migrant children – a process whereby the children’s illiteracy and disrupted schooling is defined as a disability. Paniagua (2017) points to a similar ‘fallacious analogy’ between diversity and disability, whereby SEN is either read as a consequence of being from a linguistically, culturally and socially diverse family, or cultural background in itself becomes understood in terms of special needs. This is further supported by Gabel et al (2009) who point out that ‘at the nexus of disability and immigration lie institutional responses that attempt to assimilate or colonialize groups by pathologizing differences and treating them with special education interventions’ (p. 626).

As these papers highlight, multi-cultural readiness and cultural sensitivity on behalf of schools has an important impact on migrant children who find themselves in the complex intersection with SEN. However, as shown by Migliarini (2018), attempts to promote cultural sensitivity need careful consideration to avoid the risk of reproducing cultural stereotypes. This is illustrated in her paper by a quote from a mental health professional, who talks about the use of a cultural mediator:

If you start talking about psychotherapy they won’t understand, perhaps you could mention something related to “magic”, otherwise they’ll start asking you why they are here and when they can get papers [...].

(Migliarini 2018, p. 450, author’s emphasis)

Migliarini (2018) critically comments that rather than facilitating understanding, the cultural mediator described in the quote seem to perpetuate ‘an unbalanced power relationships between coloniser and colonised in the host society’ while at the same time ‘discrediting’ and ‘exoticising’ the culture of asylum-seeking and refugee children (p. 450). Based on this, Migliarini emphasises the importance of cultural mediators who

themselves have been migrants or asylum seekers. The benefits of recruiting support from the migrant community is similarly mentioned by Oliver and Signal (2017) who describe how having a Teaching assistant from Pakistan helped mothers in their study attend appointments and speak about their child's condition.

School Approaches to SEN

In addition to school's multicultural readiness and approaches, their specific approaches to SEN similarly varied and affected the assessment and placement of migrant children with SEN. In the Spanish context, Paniagua (2015) observed that every school and even different professionals of the same school used different frameworks to implement and explain interventions to parents, due to a lack of policy guidance, resulting in referral processes being highly personal and subjective. Migliarini (2018) also commented on the arbitrariness of the SEN identification process in Italy and, in their review of Italian national policies and individual school plans in relation to SEN, Migliarini et al. (2018) furthermore argued that policies are heavily skewed towards individualised interventions through support teachers, rather than broader issues, thus leading to a stigmatisation of migrant students labelled as having SEN.

The role of teachers and support staff was mentioned across the papers, with several highlighting the importance of teamwork between the two groups (Caldin 2014; Hamilton 2013; Sinkonnen and Kyttälä). However, in several of the papers it was also noted that teachers and support staff rarely worked on an equal basis (Caldin, 2014; Hamilton, 2013). Hamilton (2013) commented on the often noisy and poorly resourced locations assigned to second language learning, which may 'send out messages that the work undertaken with these children is unimportant' (p. 210). In the Finnish context, Sinkonnen and Kyttälä described some possible disadvantages in having assistants in

the classroom, particularly if they shared native language with the pupils, as this could influence language learning and result in too much dependency on the teaching assistant. Furthermore, they argued that many of the current good practices, such as co-teaching, were considered to be challenging due to the lack of funding in schools. Similar structural issues were mentioned in some of the other papers, where for example turn-over of staff was identified as an issue affecting inclusion and quality of education (Caldin 2014; Caldin and Cinotti 2018; McIntyre and Hall 2018).

Finally, the training of teachers was a theme which occurred in several of the papers. Out of the 37 teachers interviewed by Hamilton (2013), ‘31 claimed that they had not been adequately trained to work with migrant children; instead developing skills and strategies in practice.’ Of the six who felt they could cope, five said this was because of the support they were receiving from the EAL Service’ (p. 213), further emphasising the importance of support staff. In the Spanish context, Paniagua (2017) also reported teachers consistently saying that they didn’t have enough training and support to deal with migrant children with suspected SEN. He argued that the lack of training in issues around cultural diversity resulted in prejudices and biased expectations emerging as part of their view of families. Another important point in Paniagua’s (2017) paper is the reliance of Spanish schools on external services when dealing with diversity in the classroom, which results in ‘problems’ being framed in relation to the children rather than the classroom and social context.

The School System

In addition to schools developing approaches to cultural diversity and SEN in the context of migration, the papers showed that they were also on a more general journey with regards to shifting educational regimes, and that this had an impact on migrant

children both with and without SEN. This was described well in McIntyre and Hall's (2018) study of Head Teachers in England, who 'experienced the curriculum as rigid and over-full, controlled by national school-level accountability technologies that allowed them very little flexibility to meet the special needs of Asylum Seeking and Refugee students' (p. 14). Hamilton (2013) similarly commented on the increased demands on teachers' time within the UK performance-driven school culture, making 'the task of providing the in-depth support often initially required by migrant children too challenging for some practitioners' (p. 213). These particular issues around standardization, performance and accountability were (not surprisingly) more prevalent in the studies from the UK, where the educational system is highly characterised by competitiveness and marketization. However, the teachers in Paniagua's (2015) study from Spain also found the curriculum too rigid and the time too limited to coordinate and look for alternative practices. Paniagua (2017) furthermore describes the difficulties experienced by children with SEN in relation to time-measured task and correction of homework, both tasks derived from curricular constraints and the need to save time.

Theme 3: Journeys into SEN

The children described in the studies, either by their families, teachers or the researcher, were at different stages of their journey into SEN, with some having been diagnosed previous to migration, others after having begun school in their country of settlement. Three themes were identified within their journey to SEN: 1) assessment and enrolment, 2) over-representation of migrant students in SEN provision, and 3) unrecognized needs.

Assessment and enrolment

The assessment of migrant children with SEN and their enrolment in schools was, not surprisingly, a major theme in the reviewed papers, which particularly emphasised the complexities of assessing children who lacked familiarity with the local language. Illustrating this, Madziva and Thondhlana (2017) quoted a UK teacher describing some of the difficulties involved in making sure that two hearing impaired Syrian refugee children were correctly assessed and placed:

These children have never been in school in their entire life They came here, and they'd clearly got no spoken English, they'd got no British Sign Language. They'd got no written Arabic to speak of; they'd got no spoken Arabic. They'd got Arabic Sign Language, which was a language that was developed with their parents. So, first of all, we had to establish that they had no additional learning needs. ... I'm now completely confident that neither of them have additional learning needs, so they are just both profoundly deaf ...

(female teacher, school 2, Madziva and Thondhlana 2017, p. 952).

The need to distinguish between language and SEN and finding the right placement for migrant children were also given strong emphasis in Oliver and Singal's (2017) study, as exemplified by a Deputy Head Teacher quoted in their English study:

We're very conscious of the issue that ... what would be really wrong is if a child was in a special school because it was a language issue and not a learning issue. And we've had the odd child that has been wrongly placed that we've moved out very quickly because it became very quickly apparent that they haven't had a special need.

(Deputy Head Teacher, Oliver and Singal 2017, p. 1222)

The issue of appropriate assessment practices and systems to distinguish language difficulties from learning difficulties was also mentioned by Paniagua (2017) and Sinkkonen and Kyttälä (2014). The Spanish teachers interviewed in Paniagua (2017) described problems in working out whether children had SEN when they also lacked proficiency in Catalan or Spanish. The result was often significant delays in referrals. Delays were furthermore explained as a result of the subjectivity of teacher assessments, the lack of coordination between teachers and SEN teachers and coordinators, and parental unawareness of the extent of difficulties experienced by the children. Illustrating some of these issues, Paniagua highlighted that, in one of the schools he had worked in, only 5 out of 70 children receiving special education had undergone a complete professional evaluation. Paniagua (2015) furthermore commented that the significant diversity and subjectivity in assessment practices in Spain, resulted in migrant students being misplaced in general or special education.

In Finland, Sinkkonen and Kyttälä (2014) described how migrant students (both first and second generation) since the 1990s had been attending a one-year separate preparatory classes, which helped them improve their Finnish and adjust to the Finnish school system. However, they argued that even after this year, it may still be difficult to distinguish learning difficulties from what they call ‘culturally and linguistically-based educational difficulties’, partly due to the lack of sufficient assessment methods and practices. Illustrating the link between school journeys and children’s journeys into SEN, they note that assessments is currently being made a priority in Finish educational reform. The issues they raise may thus have changed since the writing of their paper.

While language was described by almost all the studies as a key element of correct assessment, McIntyre and Hall (2018) noted the importance of also considering other factors relating to the migrant experience. All the head of schools interviewed in

their study expressed worries ‘about the difficulties of assessing the special needs of children who did not speak English, particularly where the difficulties were exacerbated because the child had experienced significant trauma’ (p. 10).

Overrepresentation of Migrant Students in SEN provision

The overrepresentation of migrant students in Italian SEN provision was a key theme in the studies conducted by Migliarini and colleagues (Migliarini, 2018; Migliarini et al., 2018). In a number of critical papers, they highlight how ‘Italian national policy constructs cultural and linguistic diversity as forms of deviance and pathology, when compared to the white Italian/ European norm’ (Migliarini et al., 2019, p. 760). Making a similar point, Caldin (2014), argue also in relation to Italy, that migrant children with equal cognitive skills were often assessed less positively than their classmates. In England, a similar issue was described by Hamilton (2013) who commented on the prevalent practice of seating migrant children with lower ability students and argued that this may ‘lead some teachers (and perhaps children themselves) into assuming migrant learners as having special educational needs’ (p. 208).

The positioning of migrant students as less ‘able’, due to their differences from a ‘pre-determined, standardised ‘norm’ is described by Migliarini (2018) as the main reason they are over-represented in SEN provision. Refugee children’s illiteracy, she argues, becomes defined as a learning disability which, in turn, allows teachers to access extra classroom support without having to make any significant changes to the curriculum or their practice. A similar issue is raised by Gabel et al. (2009) who describe how in Germany, language difficulties in themselves often lead to a transfer to special schools as these were seen as a way to secure additional resources for disadvantaged students. Placing migrant children in special education due to linguistic

difficulties is however questionable, not only because they may not have good language role models within this group, but also due to the labelling and potential stigma attached to being defined as SEN (Sinkkonen and Kyttälä, 2014). In addition, and as mentioned by Migliarini, (2018), in the process ‘teachers miss critical factors such as consideration of the students’ native language, the effects of the traumatic journey they have experienced on their learning, and the number of years in formal schooling in their country of origin’ (p. 448).

Unrecognized Needs

Contrary to the situation described by Migliarini (2018; et al. 2018) and further complicating the picture of children’s journeys into SEN, Hamilton (2013) identifies a reluctance amongst the teachers in her Welsh study to label migrants as having SEN given the complexity of distinguishing linguistic difficulties from learning difficulties and the guidance they were given on the issue. However, as Hamilton argues, practitioners’ fear of making assumptions based on assessments and practices, which derive from a particular set of values and attitudes, also led to them being concerned that the children’s needs were going unrecognized. This was further complicated by the lack of information accompanying the children, bringing the argument back to the points made in the first section of this analysis about the family journeys and showing the strong link between migrant children’s journey into SEN and the related journeys of their families and schools.

Discussion

The present review has illustrated that the literature focusing on migrant children with

SEN in Europe is very limited. Only a few European countries were represented in the review, and the findings presented thus have to be considered as snap-shots rather than a comprehensive picture of approaches and issues relating to migrant children with SEN in Europe. However, even from this very small sample of studies, some important commonalities were identified, particularly in relation to home-school communication and collaboration, language and assessment. These suggest that families, schools and organisations grapple with many of the same issues across European educational systems, and that this has significant implications for migrant children with SEN. Another important theme identified across several of the studies was the impact of a ‘deficit’ approach to migrant children and their families common amongst many teachers and professionals. Within each of the three ‘journeys’ described in the review, the importance of professionals acknowledging cultural and individual diversity has been emphasised, not only by considering the cultural backgrounds of migrants, but also by critically understanding their own cultural framework and how they use it in their work with families. The review highlights common practices to be aware of, and provides significant evidence that more training is needed of school staff in how to manage and understand diversity in relation to migrant children with SEN.

In addition to these issues, the themes identified in the review also show that the challenges experienced by parents and teachers cannot be seen in isolation from the general school system, which in many European countries have suffered significantly from funding cuts and ‘effectivisation.’ The review suggests that at least some of the issues identified in relation to the assessment of and provision for migrant children with SEN could be alleviated by allocating more resources to schools, lowering the child-teacher ratio and acknowledging the importance of qualified and consistent support staff. While the papers tended to focus on the families or the individual approaches of

school professionals, the review thus suggests that comparative research also needs to focus on the broader role of national school systems and their direct or indirect impact on migrant children with SEN in different countries.

One of the challenges of conducting cross-European research on migrant children with SEN is the complex and socially constructed nature of categories related to both migration and SEN, and the large variations in the type of data countries collect (UNICEF et al., 2018). Most of the papers in this review were qualitative and therefore they do not allow for any quantification of the scale of the issue, or a comprehensive understanding of the problem of over-representation of migrant children within SEN across Europe. UNICEF et al., (2018) and UNICEF/UNHRC (2018) have called for more and better information to be collected on migrant children to *‘enable an effective assessment of gaps in protection systems and the fulfilment of child rights’* including for those who have with disabilities. The present review supports this call, as the papers included in the review adopted a range of different categories (including for example refugees, asylum seekers, migrants), which made direct comparisons difficult. In addition, there was some evidence of inconsistent use of terminology in some of the studies, where for example migrant children and ‘children of migrants’ were collated (Caldin 2014; Caldin and Cinotti 2018) or children were defined as migrants in one context and as refugees in another (Migliarini 2018; Migliarini 2019). These inconsistencies point to the need of both qualitative and quantitative research to develop a common framework for analysis to enable the generation of more and better knowledge on the intersection between migration and SEN.

However, categories are often political and connected to funding, and collection of data on migrant children may furthermore be problematic, as illustrated by recent evidence from the UK showing that the Department of Education had shared personal

details of students with the Home Office as part of immigration checks (Allen-Kinros, 2019). Considering the current climate in Europe towards migration and the general diminishing of public resources, the review thus leaves open the question as to how further research may be mobilised to improve categorisation, information and data gathering to document the issues faced by migrant children with SEN and support them, without inadvertently compromising their personal information, access to resources or status in the countries they have settled in.

Conclusion

The 13 articles reviewed in this paper illustrate that there are multiple interrelated variables involved in the education of migrant children with SEN, and that much can be gained from seeing these, not only in a cross-national comparative perspective but also through a fluid and time-contextual lens. Reflecting this, we have described three ‘journeys’: the family journey, the school journey and the journey into SEN. A number of themes were identified within each of these journeys, all emphasising the importance of language and inter-cultural competence in communication with families and children, culturally sensitive and consistent assessment procedures, training of professionals across national contexts, and acknowledgement of the structural limitations experienced by schools.

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