

Engagement in early childhood education: A systematic review of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller populations in Europe

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Abstract

This systematic review focuses on engagement in early childhood education (ECE) within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) communities. ECE increases lifelong educational success rates along with narrowing poverty and equity gaps. Yet the GRT participation rate in ECE is nearly half that of the majority mainstream population. In an effort to understand the underlying barriers and facilitators of engagement in ECE among GRT populations, two search methods were employed: a search of the academic databases and a grey literature search using a defined and informed search strategy (PRISMA). We included studies that were ECE focused and included GRT individuals from the continent of Europe and surrounding islands. All articles in this review were to be published in English and informed by PRISMA guidelines. Five identified qualitative articles were assessed for quality and underwent data extraction. Data were analysed using Thematic Synthesis through NVivo12. Results identified themes that included: first, external barriers, for example, financial means and prejudice. Second, internal barriers such as negative parent ideals and culture. Third, external facilitators, for example, school support, teacher support and parent participation. Last, internal facilitators such as parent motivation along with parent and educator hopes

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and experiences. This review has the potential to inform ECE educators, settings, stakeholders and policymakers in understanding the lived experiences of GRT families, what facilitators can do to ensure greater uptake and engagement with ECE and what barriers are present in order to create pathways of change for Europe's largest minority group.

KEYWORDS

early childhood education, engagement, equity, Gypsy, Roma and Travellers, inclusion, participation

Context and implications

Rational for this study: This study was conducted because Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) families across Europe engage with early childhood education (ECE) at significantly lower rates than the majority population, yet little research has worked to synthesise both barriers and facilitators in an effort to understand this phenomenon.

Why new findings matter: The findings matter because they consolidate limited evidence while also emphasising how equity, access, inclusion and participation combined shapes engagement in early childhood education.

Implications for education practitioners, policy makers and researchers: Implications are relevant for practitioners, policy makers and researchers. For ECE practitioners this review emphasises the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive curriculum and community-school relationships as strategies to cultivate trust and partnership with GRT families. For policy makers, it demonstrates the need for clarity, resourcing and accountability in national strategies to ensure European policy is implemented meaningfully and effectively at local levels. For researchers, the findings present significant gaps requiring cross-national comparisons, longitudinal studies and participatory approaches that centre GRT voices in shaping future ECE policy and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRTs), Europe's largest ethnic minority, have been historically underrepresented in educational research and even more so in the early childhood education (ECE) sector. Despite difficulties in census attainment across Europe, it is estimated that more than 10–12 million individuals identify with being a part of the GRT population (European Commission, 2020a). Less than half of the GRT population is engaging with ECE. It is reported that 44% of GRT children attend or engage with ECE, far below the 93% of the EU average (European Parliament, 2025). While policy works to reform and address issues of low ECE engagement among GRT, there is a disconnect with the quality and amount of research that has been done to understand key facilitators and barriers in the lives of GRT individuals.

This systematic review will synthesise the evidence on barriers and facilitators to GRT engagement in ECE by compiling and analysing data that represents the voices and experiences of GRT along with the educators who work with the GRT population. In doing so,

this systematic review will provide information that can inform policy reform in order to best address the needs of the GRT population. Lastly, this systematic review will assist in developing the conversation within Europe about the ECE circumstances in the GRT population.

GRTs in Europe

GRTs are historically nomadic people, with subgroups from distinct geographic regions, ethnicities and cultures, bonded by similar values of lifestyle (GOV.UK, 2022). There are complex cultural differences within the GRT population. Some GRT do not engage in a nomadic lifestyle at all or may identify within subgroups that the broader terminology of GRT does not capture (The Traveller Movement, 2022). Such subgroups include but are not limited to Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash, Ashkali and Abdal (European Commission, 2020). While specific subgroups of GRTs should be recognised as unique entities, the umbrella term 'Gypsies, Roma and Travellers' serves to represent a broader community with some shared cultural values. Furthermore, although most European organisations use the umbrella term 'Roma', this systematic review will use the term Gypsies, Roma and Travellers (GRTs). Coming from an Irish perspective where Irish Travellers are a prevalent part of society, this review felt it important to use an inclusive term. The term 'Roma' can be considered problematic as it unintentionally may exclude certain groups furthering marginalisation (Murray, 2012). While the term 'GRT' is not entirely inclusive, it does attempt to capture a larger group of individuals. Using this umbrella term is not to diminish or ignore important ethnic and or cultural comparisons but instead to serve a community that shares similar needs and recognition of rights. This systematic review will focus on the GRT population in the European context. However, it is important to recognise that GRTs do exist outside Europe and reside worldwide (HarvardFXB, 2018).

Across Europe, GRTs have faced structural inequalities and discrimination in education and care, hindering the willingness of GRTs to trust national education and care systems which has created a deep misunderstanding between the two (EUROCITIES, 2023). Segregation of GRTs in education has occurred across Europe and is still a pressing issue for reform to date (Council of Europe, 2024). GRT children are often misdiagnosed as needing additional educational support, which can result in sending them to a remedial school, away from mainstream non-GRT students, which is another unofficial form of segregation (Greenberg, 2010). In Ireland, there were separate classes for Irish Traveller children in the primary school sector, with 'Traveller only' classes ending only in 2004 (Irish Traveller Movement, 2019). With a history of segregation at the policy and school levels, teacher ideals have also caused discrimination inside the classroom. Research in the United Kingdom suggests that teachers tend to show stereotypical attitudes towards GRTs and view GRT children as generally low achieving (Lloyd & McCluskey, 2008). Stereotypes embedded in mainstream European culture against GRT communities cannot be dismantled by policy change alone. Instead, genuine progress requires a deeper understanding of GRT identities and the specific needs they themselves define as essential for meaningful early educational engagement.

European policy has increasingly embedded GRT inclusivity into major strategies and action plans to promote educational uptake and engagement. Some examples are the Council of Europe Strategic Action Plan for Roma and Traveller Inclusion (2020–2025), Roma Equality, Inclusion and Participation in the EU (2020–2030) and Every Child Learns UNICEF Education Strategy (2019–2030). These policies advocate for ECE inclusion, cultural recognition and equity for GRT communities across Europe. While these overarching recommendations reflect strong commitments to change, national governments are ultimately responsible for transforming European-wide policy into actionable national policy that translates best to fit their approach in achieving the mutual outcome of GRT engagement. Due

to this, implementation of European policy varies significantly between individual countries. Each country within Europe may have considerable differences in resource allocation, strategic clarity and policy implementation that can impact the overall effectiveness (European Commission, 2024).

This gap may become more apparent at the local level, where education authorities can struggle to implement and enforce international and national policy goals with insufficient guidance or lack of funding, a pattern noted more broadly in education policy research (Arar et al., 2019). For example, while many European policy documents call for curriculum representation and cultural responsiveness for GRT children in ECE, there is little published evidence of clear implementation guides or consensus among educators and policymakers on how to systematically achieve these aims. This reflects a broader pattern in the education literature, where policy commitments to culturally responsive curriculum are often not matched with practical strategies for implementation such as educator resources, educator professional development, school leadership or adequate regulatory support (Brown et al., 2021).

GRT engagement in ECE

European policy has made efforts to extend education and care resources and accessibility to GRTs. However, despite attempts by European policy to solve the lack of educational engagement and poor educational trajectories, around 50% of GRT children in Europe do not complete primary education and only 25% complete secondary education (Council of Europe, 2020). GRTs across Europe have historically been reported to have lower levels of attainment with higher levels of school absenteeism and school withdrawal (Pop, 2022). The European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights reports that 36% of GRT individuals have difficulty in reading the national language of their country while nearly half (43%) have difficulty in writing it. Below half of GRT children attend or engage with ECE, in contrast to nearly all children of the mainstream population attending and engaging (European Parliament, 2025). However, it should be noted that each country within Europe has varying degrees of ECE participation within their own general population due to factors specific to the region. For instance, Bosnia and Macedonia have low ECE rates for the population as a whole with even lower rates for the GRT community due to lack of services and access. In comparison, Spain and Hungary have relatively high ECE rates among both mainstream and GRT communities due to well-funded and accessible compulsory ECE programmes (Eurydice, 2025).

Significant structural barriers that prevent or discourage GRTs from engaging within education in the first place exist across Europe. The Romani Early Years Network acknowledges the lack of research in understanding inclusion for children under six and has found that 60% of GRT children under the age of three do not have adequate access to ECE (Macías-Aranda & Valls Carol, 2023). Additionally, specific barriers that contribute to lack of access can include first, financial costs and hidden fees within ECE; second, insufficient local provisions such as lack of infrastructure; third, limited awareness and information about ECE within the GRT community; fourth, cultural exclusion such as lack of cultural content or difference in language; and lastly, historical discrimination and segregation within education (World Bank, 2012).

Critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality

Issues such as these can be better understood using CRT which addresses the ingrained racism present even in modern day society that is seen at legal, cultural and psychological

levels (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Racism as explained in CRT suggests that not only are blatant acts of hatred due to race seen as racism, but also more subtle controls of power that ultimately lead to oppression and disadvantage among minority ethnic groups (Gillborn, 2006). With racism theorised as being endemic within society, it is of great importance to understand the perspectives of GRTs on the barriers and facilitators of engagement with ECE to identify pathways of change that current policy may be overlooking.

CRT applied to education allows researchers to critically assess aspects such as 'educational opportunities, school climate, representation, and pedagogy' in relation to historically marginalised populations (Ledesma & Calderón, 2015). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) published their first theorised version of CRT in education with their paper 'Towards a Critical Race Theory of Education'. This paper was the first of its kind to call attention to the under-theorised topic of race in education in distinction to the developments of gender and class that were of predominant interest at the time. Ladson-Billings and Tate constructed and emphasised the role of the social-structural and cultural significance race plays in education. Ladson-Billings and Tate successfully propelled CRT into the education sector and it is now a permanent facet of how scholars and researchers analyse marginalised students and their school experiences. Since then, evident issues have been brought forth that highlight the racial achievement gap, the disproportionate discipline of marginalised students and the absence of a culturally responsive curriculum within the school system (Howard, 2008; Simson, 2013; Yosso & Solórzano, 2007).

Intersectionality was also used as a paradigm for this review to better understand and uncover complexities related to identity that are present in society (Anthias, 2012). An individual's race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, religion, citizenship, ability and age all function as influencing components of individual identity with race, class and gender being the most predominant pillars of intersectionality observed in early application (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). Intersectionality is especially suited to educational research in relation to minorities as it explores vital concerns to well-being and engagement, such as understanding the diverse student experience, addressing systematic inequalities (Gillborn, 2015), reducing achievement gaps (Tefera et al., 2018), creating inclusive curriculum and pedagogy (Banks, 2016), promoting culturally responsive teaching (Johnson, 2020), fostering equity and social justice and empowering marginalised students (Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017).

Equity, access, inclusion and participation in ECE

Broader debates within the ECE field concerning equity, access, inclusion and participation are situated within this review. ECE is internationally recognised as a foundation for lifelong learning, well-being, economic productivity and health (UNESCO, 2024). However, meaningful engagement with ECE remains disproportionate at both individual and systemic levels, shaped by socioeconomic status, ethnicity, culture and migration (OECD, 2025). Current discussion in the field emphasises equitable access to ECE by addressing the structural inequalities of poverty, racism and marginalisation, alongside inclusion through a culturally responsive curriculum that is adapted to meet the needs of children and their families.

Defining these terms is essential to ensure clarity as to how these items are being explored through this review. Equity in ECE is a right all children hold regardless of socioeconomic status, race, culture, ability or background (Zero to Three, 2024). Equity means ensuring ECE programmes provide equal access and opportunities to support all children in their development while taking into account their diverse needs. Access to ECE is a multidimensional concept that considers the following access indicators: reasonable effort (e.g. location, availability and hours of operation), affordability, support of the developing child

and the needs of parents (CCEEPRA, 2017). Inclusion in ECE refers to equitable practices that promote all children's active participation, belonging and learning through high-quality settings that use developmentally and culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) (Soukakou et al., 2024). Participation in ECE can be defined as being shaped by multiple factors and intersecting with the socio-ecological levels that describe human development, as defined by Bronfenbrenner, which include elements such as the child, family, ECE setting and policy landscape (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Additionally, affordability, access or discrimination could impact a family's ability to engage (Beatson et al., 2022; Grace et al., 2014).

By analysing the experiences of GRT families and ECE educators who provide services within the GRT community, this review contributes to these wider contemporary issues. It explores equity, access, inclusion and participation as it pertains to a population that remains under-researched within ECE.

Engagement with ECE and care

In this review, we include engagement as an element of ECE participation which can be defined as the active involvement of individuals in an activity (Wong & Liem, 2021). Engagement has behavioural, emotional, motivational and cognitive facets, such as attending school, liking school, wanting to attend school and trying hard in school (Symonds & Hargreaves, 2016; Wong & Liem, 2021). In this review, we represent GRT's engagement in ECE as the family's and children's willingness to participate in ECE, the effort that they expend in participating and the amount of time that children participate or that families facilitate participation for their children, compared to participation norms for the general community and for other cultural groups.

The first 3 years of life are an especially sensitive period of time for brain development, after birth a young child's brain rapidly produces synaptic connections based on experiences of their external environment (Halfon et al., 2001). A young child's brain reaches approximately 1000 trillion synaptic connections based on the experiences of their external environment by about age three which is double of what is present in an adult's brain. After the expansive growth of synaptic connections, a process called pruning begins. Pruning allows a child's brain to discard unused synapses and develop stronger reinforced connections of stronger synaptic connections which are influenced by the external environment. This process shapes the architecture of a child's brain (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2024). This stage of early development presents a window of opportunity for expansive brain growth and lifelong foundational development. Care settings such as preschool and community settings along with family home life all possess points of interaction for children to build their skills in cognitive, social, attention and self-regulation (Yoshikawa et al., 2013).

The development of social and emotional competencies that underpin engagement is a key driver of a child's ability to make the best use of resources available to them in educational contexts, such as teacher and peer support and effective interaction with educational materials including learning tools and assessments (Symonds et al., 2023). Accordingly, individual engagement in education is a precursor of achievement in childhood and across the life-course (Symonds et al., 2023). Educational achievement through meaningful engagement is especially important for minority groups, such as GRT, whose educational success can be compromised by discriminatory perceptions from mainstream society and education systems (Motti-Stefanidi & Masten, 2013).

Additionally, engaging in ECE can increase lifelong educational success rates along with narrowing poverty and equity gaps (Wilder et al., 2008). Yet, the GRT participation rate in ECE is nearly half that of the majority mainstream population (European Parliament, 2025),

suggesting that cultural and sociocultural factors are underpinning differences in engagement for this population.

According to the Development-in-Sociocultural-Context (DISC) Model for Children's Engagement in Learning (Wang et al., 2019), engagement in education develops out of individuals' experience within learning environments that is further shaped by sociocultural factors including social identity, social positioning and cultural beliefs. The way that children or individuals engage with education can therefore be understood in the context of the wider ecological system that is comprised of access to resources, family stressors, community and school experiences, social stratification and differing opportunity structures. Culture is central to the DISC model, making the model well suited for informing the conceptual perspective of this systematic review. In the model, culture works as both a proximal and distal influence of child development and engagement with education. According to the model, the social, economic, political and cultural systems around the child also influence engagement in education. Furthermore, proximal elements such as socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race and culture collectively contribute to a child's cultural narratives and social world. The DISC model therefore emphasises a wide range of social and cultural factors that can influence GRT's engagement in ECE which we will be conscious of in our interpretation of the results.

OBJECTIVES

This review aims to synthesise the evidence on GRT's engagement in ECE with a focus on the facilitators of and barriers to engagement. The review is framed using CRT and the sociocultural DISC model of engagement in education: fusing child, family, community and cultural perspectives. The main aims of this systematic review are to: (1) uncover facilitators of GRT's engagement in ECE, (2) uncover barriers of GRT's engagement in ECE and (3) map the experiences of GRT's regarding ECE.

METHODS

The review process followed the PRISMA statement and guidelines (Page et al., 2021), which provide a standardised framework for transparent reporting of systematic reviews. These stages include identification of studies, eligibility assessment and inclusion of studies for analysis. In line with PRISMA, the study selection process is presented in the PRISMA flow diagram (Figure 1), which details the number of records identified, screened, excluded and included in the final review. In addition, the Quality Appraisal Checklist for Quantitative, Qualitative and Mixed Methods (QQM) Studies was used to assess the quality of the full text publications (Symonds & Tang, 2024; Tang et al., 2025).

Eligibility criteria

To be eligible for inclusion, studies had to focus on ECEC, examine GRT families or practitioners working with these communities and present empirical findings on barriers and/or facilitators of engagement. Eligible publications included peer-reviewed articles, book chapters and reports from recognised organisations, published in English. No limits were placed on the publication year in order to capture the full scope of available research.

PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for new systematic reviews which included searches of databases, registers and other sources

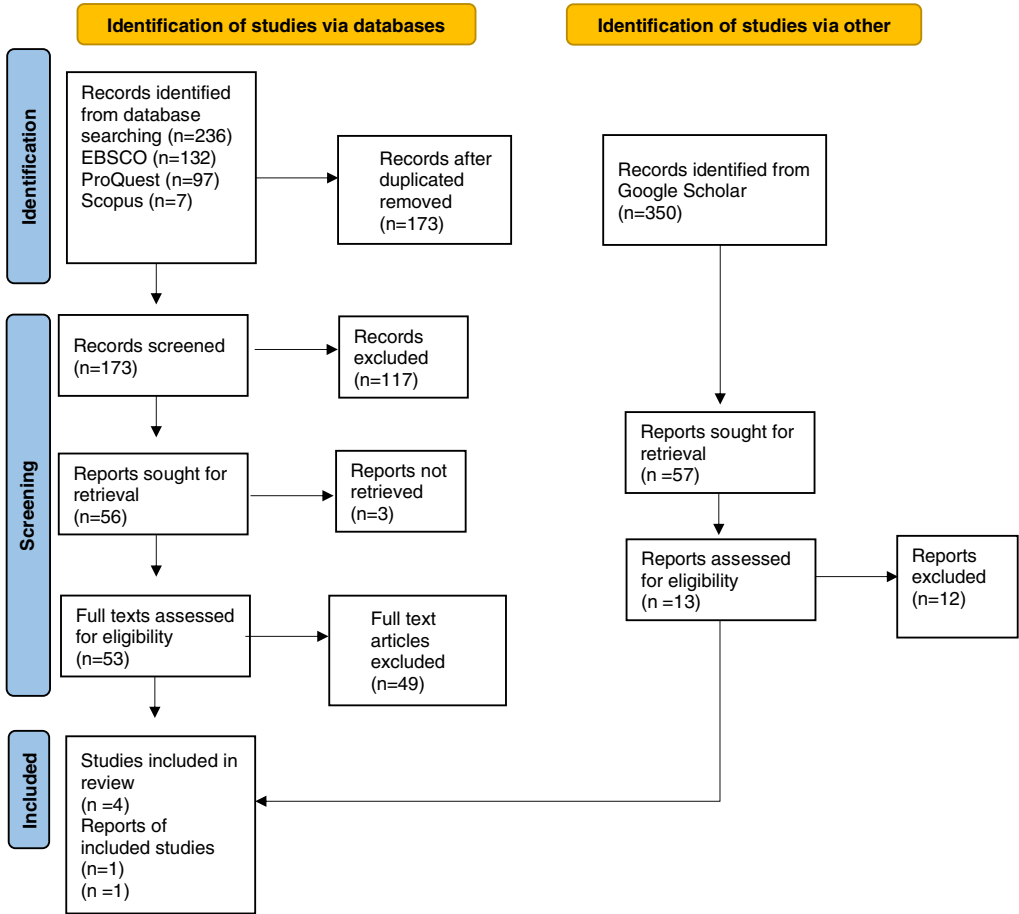


FIGURE 1 PRISMA flow diagram.

Selection criteria

The inclusion criteria used in the systematic review included the following:

- ECE—this refers to any regulated arrangement that provides education and care for children from birth to compulsory primary school age, and may vary across the EU (European Union, 2021).
- GRTs—this has been used to describe a range of ethnic groups or people with nomadic ways of life who are not from a specific ethnicity (GOV.UK, 2022).

This systematic review focused solely on material from the continent of Europe and surrounding islands. All articles in this review were published in English.

The exclusion criteria used in this systematic review include the following:

- Occupational travellers—this refers to travellers who do not identify with the ethnicity or cultural component of a migrant community.

- Parental home school—a parent may not be the sole provider of ECE and care unless the parent is caring for multiple children from outside the home including their own child.
- Children in primary, secondary or higher education.

SEARCH STRATEGY

Two search methods were employed: a search of the academic databases and a grey literature search that focused on reports accessible through Google Scholar. The following platforms were used to conduct the database search: EBSCO (Academic Search Complete, British Education Index, ERIC, Historical Abstracts, Teacher Reference Center, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, APA PsycBooks), ProQuest (Education Collection, Education Database, ERIC, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Policy File Index, Social Science Database, Sociology Collection, Applied Social Sciences Index & Abstracts (ASSIA), Sociological Abstracts, Social Services Abstracts, Sociology Database) and Scopus (education, sociology, developmental studies, political science, psychology). For the grey literature search, we first identified the top seven countries with the highest GRT populations in Europe: Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania, Hungary, Greece, Czechia and Spain (European Parliament, 2025). We then applied the search string terms in combination with each country listed and ran individual searches. A practised technique of using Google Scholar as a tool to identify grey literature was used (Haddaway et al., 2015). The first five pages of Google Scholar were searched by relevance for each of the seven most concentrated GRT countries.

Search strings

Search strings for use in the database search were developed using variations of terms to capture instances of early childhood and care and Traveller engagement. Boolean operators and truncation symbols were used to capture a more focused and specific search. The following search string was used across databases as seen in Table 1. A detailed list of search string variations is provided in Appendix A in the Supporting Information.

Screening and selection process

The screening and selection process are overviewed in the PRISMA diagram below (Figure 1). Titles and abstracts were independently screened by two reviewers according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria using Microsoft Excel and following the steps outlined in the PRISMA flowchart (Page et al., 2021). The complete PRISMA checklist is provided in Appendix B in the Supporting Information. A percentage agreement and a Kappa score were calculated following the initial screen (McHugh, 2012). Then, disagreements between reviewers were resolved using bilateral discussion. The full texts of articles were screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria by the primary reviewer. A further criterion for papers containing quantitative data was that there had to be statistics on the facilitators and/or barriers of engagement in ECE. Mixed methods papers were included if they met one or more of those criteria. Searches were limited to peer-reviewed journal articles written in English.

There were 236 records identified from the database search, EBSCO ($n = 132$), ProQuest ($n = 97$) and Scopus ($n = 7$). From the identified records, 63 were duplicates and were

TABLE 1 Search strings.

Search string—Early childhood education
“early childhood education” OR “early childhood education and care” OR “early child-care” OR “early education” OR “early-education” OR “pre-primary education” OR “pre-primary school” OR “pre-primary education” OR “childcare” OR “early childcare” OR “creche” OR “preschool*” OR “pre-school*” OR “pre school*” OR “child development* centre*” OR “nursery school*” OR “nursery education” OR “day nursery” OR “early child-care” OR “early childcare” OR “day care” OR “day-care” OR “day care centre*” OR “day-care centre*” OR “playgroup*” OR “playschool*” OR “pre-kindergarten” OR “pre-k” OR “prekindergarten*” OR “infant* school*” OR “early childcare* centre*” OR “early childcare setting*” OR “early child-care centre*” OR “early child-care setting*” OR “early childcare service*” OR “early child-care service*” OR “early education service*” OR “early year* education” OR “early-year* education”
Search string—Gypsy, Roma and Travellers
“traveller*” OR “european gypsy” OR “gypsy” OR “irish traveller” OR “pavee” OR “english gypsy” OR “scottish gypsy” OR “welsh gypsy” OR “roma* gypsy” OR “hungarian gypsy” OR “vlach rom” OR “kalderash” OR “manouche” OR “sinti” OR “tattare” OR “kale” OR “kaale” OR “cale” OR “lavari” OR “ursari” OR “boyhas” OR “nachins” OR “luri” OR “abdal” OR “romanichel” OR ashkali OR “camminanti” OR “gitano” OR “roma-sinti” OR “yenish” OR “gurbeti” OR “churari” OR “ursari”

removed, leaving 173 records to be screened. A total of 117 records were excluded through title and abstract screening, leaving 56 reports sought for full-text retrieval. A total of three reports were unretrievable, leaving 53 eligible full texts to screen. From the 53 full texts, 49 articles did not meet criteria and were therefore excluded, leaving four studies included in this review. Next, the grey literature search yielded 57 records. After screening the titles of the reports, 13 were sought for full text and only one was included in the review based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In total, five studies were included in the review.

Quality appraisal method

The Quality Appraisal Checklist for QQM was used to assess the quality of the full-text publications (Symonds & Tang, 2024; Tang et al., 2025). Each publication received a score based on how many quality indicators from the checklist each article fulfilled. Publications that received a lower score were not excluded as they were still relevant to the study and served as a way to identify gaps in prior research methodology.

Data extraction and synthesis

Study characteristics (e.g. sample size, location) were extracted into Microsoft Excel and were analysed using descriptive statistics. Where relevant information was unclear or not reported, this was recorded as ‘not reported’ and no assumptions were made. The qualitative results reported in the qualitative and mixed methods papers were copied into a Microsoft Word document then were coded into broad themes using NVivo12. There were three stages to thematically synthesise the data. Stage one consisted of line-by-line coding, stage two developed descriptive themes and analytical themes emerged from stage three (Thomas & Harden, 2008). An inductive approach to each stage of synthesis was used to categorise themes and subthemes. Due to the predominantly qualitative nature of the data and scarcity of the data it was of importance that significant themes emerged without imposed restraint (Thomas, 2006). A thematic synthesis was chosen

as the main qualitative analysis method due to its design for application in working with qualitative data that seeks to understand perspectives and experiences. The papers contained qualitative data collected with parents and educators. These data were initially analysed separately by the participant group. However, the emergent themes were highly comparable. Therefore, a decision was made to combine the entire dataset into one set of themes and subthemes. This prevented repetition when reporting the results. Data was extracted systematically from each included study. This included not only direct quotations from parents and educators but also the authors' thematic analyses, interpretations and reported findings. Information was charted on study context, population, methodology and key themes related to barriers and facilitators of engagement. A summary of these features is provided in [Table 2](#).

Timeframe

Initial searches all took place in February 2024, title and abstract screening took place between February and April 2024. Data extraction, analysis and synthesis took place between May and August 2024. The final systematic review was completed at the end of September 2024. The electronic literature search was updated during the analysis and synthesis phase to ensure that no recently published articles have been omitted.

Registration

This systematic review was prospectively registered with PROSPERO (Registration number: CRD42024510491). No substantive amendments were made to the protocol following registration. The protocol is publicly available at: <https://www.crd.york.ac.uk/PROSPERO/view/CRD42024510491>.

RESULTS

Study characteristics

A total of five studies were included. The studies were published between 2014 and 2020. The study locations were spread across Europe. The countries represented by the studies included: Turkey, Spain, Slovakia, Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Italy, Ireland, Sweden, Kosovo and the United Kingdom. All studies included either GRT participants or practitioners who work directly with GRT children and their families.

The GRT participants in this study were mostly referred to as Roma or Travellers depending on the country's terminology norms. Specific subgroups within the umbrella term 'GRT' that participants may have belonged to were often not included in the study. The total number of participants across all studies including GRT parents and educational professionals was 221. There were 134 parents, 6 teachers, 57 Roma pedagogical assistants and 24 ECE experts. While the gender of the participants was not specified in every study, most participants where gender was specified were women. Interviews were the most used method of data collection ($n=5$) while the mixed methods study also used survey as a form of data collection. A summary of these features is provided in [Table 2](#).

TABLE 2 Table of included studies.

Author & year	Study objectives	Study design	Sample	Data sources	Findings
Orcan et al. (2014)	Aimed to define Roma mothers view on their child's education	Qualitative	• 30 Roma mothers with children of ECE age • Turkey	• Case study interviews • Questionnaire	The Roma mothers articulated that they want their children to have education and jobs; that they do not want their children to suffer in the same way they did; and that the Roma culture prevents children's education.
K'halfaoui et al. (2020)	Aimed to identify the characteristics of the relationship that the Roma and migrant families have with a school that has successfully engaged Roma families and examine the way that parents' involvement in the education of their children has been promoted.	Qualitative	• Six family members (four female, two male) • Six members of school staff (four female, two male) • Spain	• Case study interviews	The main results show that the participation of these families has been fostered by a strong collaboration constructed with egalitarian dialogue, trust and confidence-based relationships and having a shared purpose of ensuring high-quality education for all children.
Lukšľk (2019)	To explore how the issue of schooling for this group of children relates to the political discourse and education policy.	Qualitative	• 62 parents (mostly women) • Slovakia	• Semi structured interviews	The parents stated that nursery school was good training for entry into primary school. They are often discouraged by members of the majority population from sending their children to school before primary school; that is, from sending their children to nursery school (which is likely to negatively impact on their education as a whole).
Boyle, Hanafin, and Flynn (2018) Boyle, Flynn, and Hanafin (2018)	Irish Traveller parents' of children in ECE on their own experience with schooling, and their views on education.	Qualitative	• 36 Traveller women and men • Ireland	• Interviews • Focus groups	Three main themes emerged: the importance of Traveller identity and culture, Travellers' pride and their awareness of others' low valuation of it; the hurt and disappointment Travellers feel when they recall the negativity of their own schooling experiences of unchallenging pedagogy, curricular alienation, racist name-calling and cultural misrecognition; and the positive value that they place on education for their children.

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Author & year	Study objectives	Study design	Sample	Data sources	Findings
Klaus and Siraj (2020) Klaus (2019)	Explores the impact of employing Roma in early childhood settings helping to bridge cultural barriers to Roma participation in early education.	Mixed Methods	• 57 Roma pedagogical assistants • 24 experts • Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Kosovo, Macedonia, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Turkey, UK	• Case study interviews • Survey	The results of the multi-country survey provide a framework to understand motivations and current trends in the hiring of Roma staff into ECE systems across Europe. This article then draws on the case studies from Serbia and the United Kingdom to illustrate similarities and differences in teacher assistant roles in two countries with regards to their creation and their key features. It also draws on evidence of impact, where this exists and perceptions of key stakeholders.

Quality appraisal results

The five included studies were assessed for quality using The Quality Appraisal Checklist for QQM (Symonds & Tang, 2024). This quality appraisal checklist is highly inclusive as it takes into account a wide variety of indicators of quality with additional indicators taken into account according to the research approach. Because of this, quality is tailored to the specific research approach, whether it be QQM. The QQM is a comprehensive quality assessment tool that guides the evaluator to make judgements across multiple categories of quality specific to sampling, data presentation and qualitative validity. Critiques of quality assessment tools include that some tools offer too few categories that are too simple and therefore do not assess the broad range of quality issues in research design, while other tools offer too many categories that are highly specific and therefore do not apply easily to most studies (Tang et al., 2025). A further issue is that many tools are designed for specific fields such as medical sciences or randomised controlled trials and cannot be applied across a range of research designs (Hong et al., 2018). In response to these challenges, the QQM was designed to create a balance of specificity and generality so that it can be used for assessing a wide range of studies in social sciences (Tang et al., 2025). The Quality Appraisal Checklist for QQM described is included in [Appendix C](#) in the [Supporting Information](#).

All studies first underwent a quality appraisal using an 8-item checklist. These items included general study characteristics such as whether studies clearly stated their aims, used an appropriate design, described their setting and recruitment procedures, provided information on participants, reported ethical approval, outlined data collection procedures and presented findings clearly. Each indicator is measured using 1 = no, 2 = partially and 3 = yes. After the eight item indicator, there are additional indicators assigned based on the research approach. Qualitative methods include an additional six indicators, quantitative methods receive an additional four to six indicators and mixed method studies receive an additional 10–12 indicators depending if the study is longitudinal or cross-sectional.

For example, the six additional qualitative indicators were applied which were concerned with description and justification of data collection instruments, the transparency of analytical procedures, the use of illustrative quotes, researcher reflexivity, the richness of data collected and the clarity of data links to conclusions. Studies which scored higher typically provided more detailed analytical accounts and clearer interpretations of participant data. Lower quality studies were less specific and provided a more limited explanation of analysis or did not provide quality data extracts to support their claims.

In [Table 3](#), each study's total score, their percentage score and the quality of the study based on the score is illustrated. Studies were not excluded due to poor quality as they were still relevant to the study and served as a way to identify gaps in prior research methodology. No priority was given to high scoring studies versus lower scoring studies. The results of the quality assessment found that the studies ranged from poor to moderate quality. The studies included, scored lower on similar components such as justification of sample size, instrument rationale and instrument examples along with a statement of their reflexivity.

Findings from thematic synthesis

This review identified five overarching themes from the data. Each theme was broken down into subthemes to give further details on the findings. External facilitators, internal facilitators, external barriers, internal barriers and general experiences were identified as overarching themes. Internal barriers and facilitators in this study refers to thoughts, ideas or reasonings

that occur in a person's psyche that influence GRT engagement with ECE. External barriers and facilitators in this study can be defined as outside forces from the environment around the individual that influence GRT engagement with ECE. Each theme contained three to five subthemes. Themes and subthemes all were representative of GRT engagement in ECE; this can be seen in [Figure 2](#).

External facilitators to GRT engagement

External facilitators who served as a catalyst for engagement in ECE were identified from the perspective of parents and educators in three of five studies. Five subthemes emerged which included school and teacher support, positive teacher ideals, parent interest at home, parent/teacher relationships and parent participation.

Subtheme 1—School and teacher support

Findings from the studies emphasised school and teacher responsibility in cultivating a supportive network for not only GRT children but also their families. The school and teacher are interrelated under the entity of the school itself, the two function in conjunction; however, there requires a shared mindset in inclusion and support for minorities or at-risk children such as GRT. Inclusion and inclusive education in this context can be defined as providing opportunity to every child despite ability or background (UNICEF, 2025). This data gives examples of what support looks like in the early years' classroom, how it is implemented and the response it has on the GRT families themselves. School and teacher support encompasses a wide measure of components that all establish a certainty in families that there is a network of aid available. Parents and teachers alike reported communication as being a strong source of support. Examples from the data include a morning greeting routine, plain-language use in the form of verbal and written communication, and the use of GRT pedagogical assistance to bridge the communication gap. The data reflected the important role the school and teachers played as they worked to cultivate an environment where GRT families and children felt supported. For example, parents reported feeling welcomed with warm interactions and the recognition of GRT culture and cultural inclusion in the form of books, posters or toys. At-home learning support was also offered from the school and teachers in the form of educational resource donations and handouts for parents that guided and informed parents on how to support learning at home.

Subtheme 2—Positive teacher ideals

Teachers in many studies were positive in their ideals on the GRT population and their involvement in education. They wanted to remain fair and equal in their expectations and confidence in students despite background. Studies have shown teacher beliefs and ideals hold value in the way they perceive the children they teach and the expectations they place on them, ultimately having the power to project educational outcomes (Timmermans & Rubie-Davies, 2018). For the most part, teachers and parents alike from several studies reported generally high teacher expectations of students, regardless of the student's background. Teachers reported confidence in their students' ability. The teachers expressed the desire to provide the best possible education to students and value the GRT families. This may serve as a facilitator in the equal treatment of students and therefore promote engagement among GRT families.

Subtheme 3—Parent interest at home

Parents from the study showed interest in their child's education and how it could be applied at home. This can encourage children to gain positive associations with school and place

TABLE 3 Quality appraisal checklist.

Study	Study type	Number of indicators	Maximum total score	Actual total score	Percentage score	Quality
Orcan et al. (2014)	Qualitative	14 (8+6)	42	21	50%	Poor
Khalifaoui et al. (2020)	Qualitative	14 (8+6)	42	28	67%	Moderate
Lukšić (2019)	Qualitative	14 (8+6)	42	23	54%	Moderate
Boyle, Flynn, and Hanafin (2018)	Qualitative	14 (8+6)	42	29	69%	Moderate
Boyle, Hanafin, and Flynn (2018)	Qualitative	14 (8+6)	42	29	69%	Moderate
Klaus and Siraj (2020)	Mixed	18 (8+4+6)	54	40	74%	Moderate
Klaus (2019)	Mixed	18 (8+4+6)	54	40	74%	Moderate

value on education. Studies have shown parent involvement that begins in early childhood has long-term effects that have the potential to mitigate school dropout and instead aid in school completion and success (Barnard, 2004). From the data, parents reported inquiring about their child's day, praising and displaying the work they brought home from preschool, affirming their efforts and practising lessons with them from preschool, such as songs, colour recognition and counting. Overall, parents across the studies seemed to exhibit pride in their child's education. Teachers also play a vital role in this, as mentioned in subtheme 1. It was reported that teachers sent home pages of songs or activities to promote home learning, as well as communicated directly with the parents on ways they could aid in their child's development, such as through storytelling, songs and colouring.

Subtheme 4—Parent–teacher relationships

The parent–teacher relationship was of high importance to the level of comfort GRT families felt in sending their children to school and participating inside the classroom. Not only do positive parent–teacher relationships impact parents but they have positive effects on the engagement of the child also. One study found that when teachers practised communication that was collaborative, culturally sensitive and responsive to feedback, while also showing concern and remembering details, not only were the parents more engaged but the children also displayed more positive engagement in school (Iruka et al., 2022). Parents and teachers described trust, rapport, reassurance, security, cultural intelligence and creating a space of equality and sense of belonging vital to their relationship. Educators in one of the included studies stated:

Teachers have a close relationship of trust with families' (Amaia. Teacher). These relationships of trust provided a safe environment for families: 'Our children's families feel loved and protected here, and this is very important, noted Rosa (Head of Studies).

(Khalifaoui et al., 2020, p. 6)

This is just one example that exemplifies the importance educators place on relationships with GRT families. Another source in the data spoke about egalitarian dialogue. The egalitarian

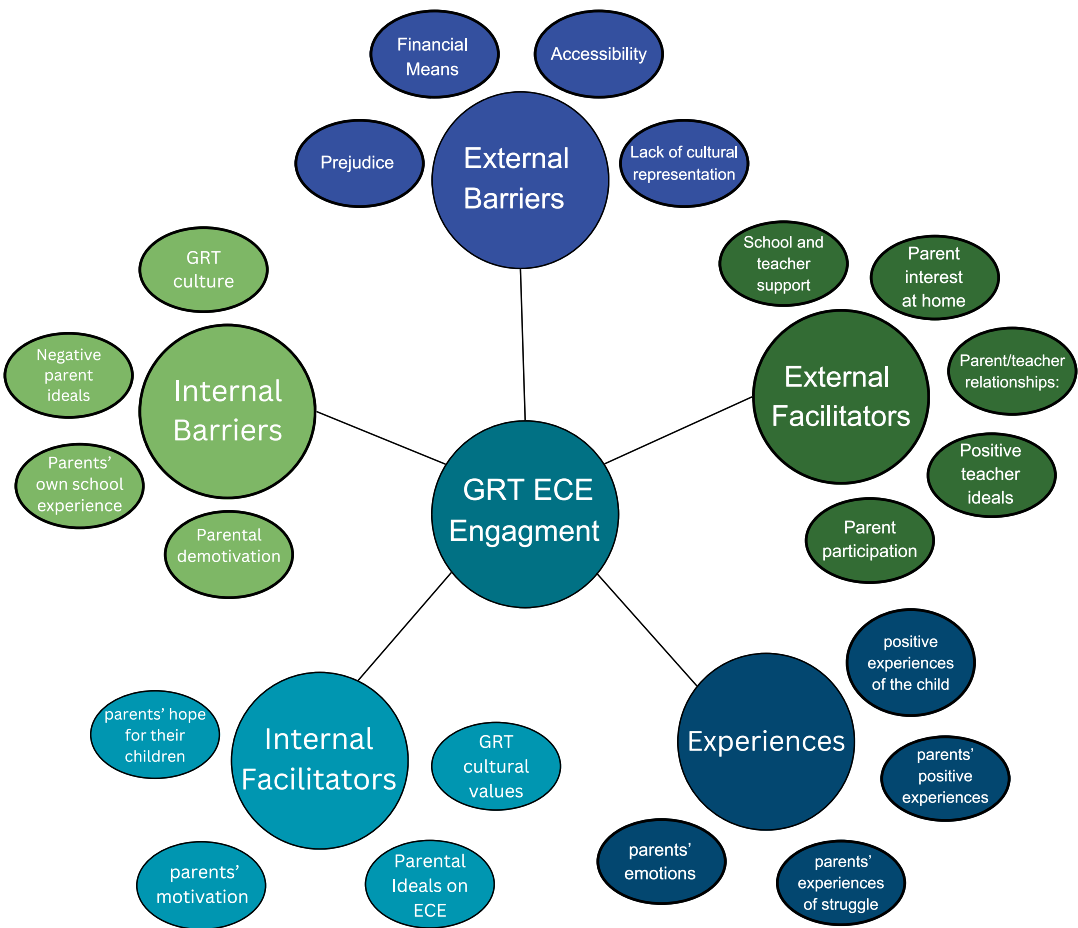


FIGURE 2 Thematic map of qualitative results.

premise is to focus on the individual's own validity according to their reasoning rather than due to the position of power or status (Flecha, 2000).

Subtheme 5—Parent participation

This subtheme specifically discusses classroom participation as a facilitator in GRT engagement with ECE. Parent participation is known to have positive effects on a child's school success in ECE (Herath, 2024). Parent participation from marginalised communities can have the same positive effects on children while also diversifying classroom interactions and exposure to different backgrounds and cultures. A teacher from one of the included studies states 'Cultural differences or not speaking the language of the school was not an obstacle to participation, as the school's vision was shared by all' (Khalfaoui et al., 2020, p. 8).

When parents experience their child's education first hand and the difference their participation makes in the classroom, they may change prior beliefs about schooling (Pelletier & Brent, 2002). Parents and teachers alike reflected that they felt like a common goal was shared between the two when it came to the children. Some teachers reported the GRT parents participating in practical ways such as renovating or repairing the classroom. Parents

reported feeling like an equal member of the classroom. Parents also reported the positive effects on their children from being a participant in the classroom.

Overall, the findings within this theme 'External Facilitators' resonate with wider ECE research that demonstrates that strong positive educator support, ideals, parent-teacher relationships, parent investment and parent participation are all central to building inclusive learning environments that have the ability to strengthen engagement in education (Herath, 2024; OECD, 2024; Timmons, 2019).

Internal facilitators to GRT engagement

In four of the five studies, internal facilitators that served as a catalyst to engagement in ECE were identified from the perspective of the GRT parents. Four subthemes emerged within the overarching theme: parents' motivation to send their children to ECE, parents' hopes for their children, parent ideals about ECE and GRT cultural values.

Subtheme 1—Parents' motivation to send their children to ECE

The GRT parents in this study seemed to have strong motivation for why they wanted to send their children to school. They seem to understand that with education comes capital. A parent from one of the included studies states

I'm going to send them both [to nursery school] so they learn something, so that something will become of them, I don't want them to live in the Roma settlement when they are adults, they should study and work, they have to live off something (woman, aged 27 years, PK)

(Lukšák, 2019, p. 5)

Parents from the study are motivated to send their children to school so they will have an occupation, learn things they do not learn at home, socialise with non GRT peers, be better prepared for primary school and not 'suffer' as they have. Parent motivation is not only linked to better engagement with ECE but could be also linked to their children's academic success (Gottfried et al., 1994).

Subtheme 2—Parents' hope for their children

GRT parents hope their children will succeed in education and have a professional career. Parents from across the studies, more specifically, want their children to become judges, prosecutors, lawyers, doctors, teachers, nurses, solicitors and barristers.

A parent in the current study stated the following:

[My son] said, 'Oh no, I'm not going to college. Daddy and you didn't go to college ... you didn't do it Mommy, so why do I have to', and I say to him, 'you get nowhere in life unless you have it'. I want the best for them. The best education for my children.

(Boyle, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2018, p. 13)

Parental aspirations and hopes for their children are important to influence their children's educational and occupational outcomes (Irwin & Elley, 2013). Parents across studies want their children to combat negative ideas of GRT and move away from their settlement. They do not want their children to be like the other children in their settlement, alluding to the fact that the other children are not educated.

Subtheme 3—Parental ideals on ECE

GRT parents from the studies had overall positive ideals on what ECE meant to them and their children. GRT parents felt children learn skills and knowledge in preschool that help them transition into primary school. Parents feel children have noticeably more positive behaviour at home from attending preschool. They felt welcomed and comfortable in the preschool compared to the primary school. Parents from the studies valued ECE for their children and wanted them to have a different relationship and experience with education than they had themselves. A parent from the study expresses her appreciation for the knowledge and skills that her children have built from attending ECE in the following statement:

Sally (parent, Cuanmara) stated that the preschool supported the children's development in a number of different areas. She explained: They are learning a lot here and I think it is a good experience for them because they're doing their painting, they are coming back telling their stories, they're singing songs.

(Boyle, Hanafin, & Flynn, 2018, p. 11)

Positive GRT parental ideals about ECE strengthen the desire to engage with education and has the possibility to encourage other families in the GRT community to also place emphasis on ECE.'

Subtheme 4—GRT cultural values

GRT cultural values have historically been seen as an opposition to school engagement due to a mismatch in culture and values that the majority population would tend to hold (Lambrev, 2016). However, there are aspects of GRT cultural values that facilitate engagement as illustrated in the current study, which found that families have tempered nomadism (stayed near schools) to support children's education and that the high value placed on kinship supports school success.

Together, this theme and the subthemes within echo the broader ECE literature that emphasises the role of parental values and motivations as a catalyst to engagement with early education and long-term educational trajectories (Kikas et al., 2013).

External barriers to GRT engagement

Two of the five studies discussed barriers to engagement with ECE and with education in general for the GRT population. Four subthemes emerged within the overarching theme: prejudice, discouragement from the majority population, financial means, accessibility and lack of GRT cultural representation.

Subtheme 1—Prejudice

There are significant numbers of experiences of racism, prejudice and bullying in the school system reported by the GRT population. Racism, prejudice and bullying that is present in the wider community is magnified in a school setting. Children cannot thrive and parents cannot feel accepted in the school setting if they experience discrimination. This can be explained through CRT (Gillborn, 2006). Findings from the synthesis indicated that across studies, parents felt they were turned away from preschools because of their ethnicity. 'P: It happened to me that I got there, they said to themselves, she's a Rom, so they told me it was full (woman, aged 24 years, TR)' (Lukšák, 2019, p. 6). Children also often experienced curricular alienation and cultural misrecognition. GRT parents from the current study reported being discouraged from enrolling their children in ECE by individuals who hold authority in

the majority population such as social workers or preschool managers who have stated that there is no need for the child to attend preschool.

Subtheme 2—Financial means

GRT parents, despite discounted or free preschool, still struggle with additional fees according to the data from the current study. Having multiple children around the same age adds to this disparity. GRT parents feel that families with money are given priority for things such as spaces available due to the ability to donate to the school. Across Europe, 80% of GRT are at risk of poverty (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2022). The financial means of the GRT population to enrol their children in ECE, along with providing funds for preschool-related expenses, still remain a barrier to overall engagement with education.

Subtheme 3—Accessibility

Some GRT parents from the current study struggle with accessibility issues in preschools if their child has health or disability needs. Along with not speaking the majority language, this places them at a disadvantage in accessing ECE services that can assist their needs. Parents from this study reported difficulties finding preschools that had space for their children and claimed they were turned away due to their ethnicity. Some GRT parents had children with health or additional needs and had trouble finding an ECE programme that would be able to address their child's needs. Additionally, children who did not speak the majority language were sent to 'special schools' which parents felt hindered their education. GRT parents also stated distance was often an issue.

I had to take her to various doctors because she has a problem with her legs. I wanted to send her to nursery school, but where?... (woman, age 20 years, TR)
P: Disabled children have to go to the nursery school in the town, but it's far away (woman, aged 24 years, PS).

(Lukšík, 2019, p. 7)

Subtheme 4—Lack of GRT cultural representation

Cultural representation in school has become a mainstream way of teaching children about multiculturalism while combating marginalisation (Kalantzis & Cope, 2005). However, according to the parents in the study, the GRT population is still not recognised in the curriculum. Some parents feel their children are failing within school due to a lack of inclusion or diversity. GRT parents see that other cultures are celebrated in school while their child is meant to assimilate into the majority population. A parent from an included study states:

There's no learning there to educate other children about the Traveller community and that gives a barrier all the time. If there was, like, a curriculum of culture and Travellers included in that it would break down barriers. Sile (Ind) mentioned that Traveller culture had not been recognised or included at an intercultural day in a local school.

(Boyle, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2018, p. 9)

Other parents felt like the inclusion of GRT culture in ECE would cause embarrassment, victimisation and ridicule. It is also important to note that the extent and intensity of these barriers are not uniform across Europe. Their impact may be highly variable depending on the national policy environment and local authority implementation. For example, differences in national resource allocation, strategy and enforcement of policy may either mitigate or exacerbate the barriers reported in these studies.

In compilation this theme broadly mirrors that of the challenges widely documented in the ECE field which include discrimination, poverty, lack of cultural representation and its impact on engagement (UNICEF, 2022). Additionally this theme underscores how structural inequalities remain at a deficit for GRT communities (Rutigiano, 2020).

Internal barriers to GRT engagement

Three out of the five studies analysed included discussion based around internal barriers GRT parents experienced that contributed to difficulty engaging with ECE. The subthemes that emerged from the overarching theme included GRT culture, parental demotivation, negative parent ideals and parents' own school experiences.

Subtheme 1—GRT culture

There are aspects of the GRT culture that can be conducive to ECE engagement while other aspects are more detrimental. GRT culture has barriers within its values that may inherently hinder families from engaging with ECE. However, many from the GRT population are now challenging these values. According to the included studies, many children from GRT communities experience poverty and are subjected to frequent arguments and language that the dominant culture often characterises as unacceptable. While many GRT communities have chosen to minimise nomadism, it is still practised among some, which interferes with regular attendance of an ECE setting. It is interesting to note that GRT parents from the current study explained a divide in other GRT communities that are 'stagnant' in growth and choose not to integrate as others from the GRT community do.

Subtheme 2—Parental demotivation

There were some parents across studies who chose not to engage with ECE at all. Their demotivation to engage with ECE was due to a number of things, such as feeling as though their child would be too difficult for the teacher to handle. Another GRT parent reported she herself did not want to be alone throughout the day and that her children kept her company. Another GRT parent reported that there would be prejudice in a school setting that she wanted to delay as long as possible. These are the reports from a very small portion of GRT parents interviewed, as most parents engaging with the researchers chose to send their children to preschool.

Subtheme 3—Negative parental ideals

GRT parents still show apprehension towards ECE and school in general. While they recognise that education holds capital and want their children to get an education, they also feel schools and teachers hold negative ideals about them. Many GRT parents perceive teachers as having low expectations for their children, showing little interest or understanding of their needs, and holding negative attitudes. Some parents report that teachers struggle to manage GRT children, leading to early expulsion from preschool. GRT parents also believe that the majority population has an easier time securing preschool places and that teachers assume GRT children won't stay in school or need the same educational achievement as others. These perceptions point to issues of cultural bias, discrimination and a lack of inclusive educational practices.

Subtheme 4—Parents' own school experience

Just a generation ago, GRT parents of children in ECE reported negative experiences with their own schooling. Due to this, there could be a lack of trust and a level of fear for their own child. Many GRT parents reported overwhelmingly negative experiences with their own

schooling, describing it as isolating, disappointing and hurtful. They recall being separated from their peers, placed in the back of classrooms or given inappropriate work, such as colouring books instead of age-appropriate assignments. Due to this unfair treatment and the discrimination they faced, many left school early with little to no literacy skills. These experiences of prejudice in the school setting left GRT parents feeling restricted by their inadequate education and distrustful of their children's education experiences.

Together this theme captures the overall influence of parents' own negative schooling experiences which reflects broader evidence of intergenerational disadvantage in education where generational exclusion can affect elements such as trust, attitudes and engagement for future generations (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In addition, aspects of cultural values themselves can act as barriers when they oppose norms of structured education systems, a challenge that is also widely recognised within GRT populations in Europe (Lauritzen, 2019).

Experiences of GRT ECE engagement

Three of the five studies analysed discussed elements of the experience parents actually had when engaging within ECE. The subthemes that emerged from this were positive experiences of the child, parents' positive experiences, parents' experiences of struggle and parents' emotions.

Subtheme 1—Positive experiences of the child

All parents reported a positive effect on their child from attending preschool. Children from GRT communities seem to display increased confidence and enthusiasm towards school and learning. Parents report their children often mimic what they've learned in the classroom, such as singing songs and playing 'teacher', indicating engagement with the material. Generally, these children are happy and look forward to attending school. A parent can be quoted as saying:

The way our kids come home happy, smile on their face, 'we learned this song today' ... She comes back every day she has something different to tell me about the preschool.

(Boyle, Hanafin, & Flynn, 2018, p. 13)

Parents also report that their children have made good progress academically and have noticed a positive change in their child's attitude, particularly when the parent actively participates in classroom activities of the child.

Subtheme 2—Parents' positive experiences

Despite GRT parents' negative experience with their own schooling, they have an abundance of positive experiences with their child's ECE education. Overall, GRT parents reported developing trusting relationships with teachers; this in turn seemed to foster a strong sense of belonging for GRT families within the school community. They expressed enjoyment in participating in their child's ECE activities, highlighting the positive impact of their involvement. Additionally, GRT parents appreciated the support they received from teachers for home learning.

Subtheme 3—Parents' experiences of struggle

GRT parents shared struggles they faced with ECE engagement. While all parents in general have some struggles during this transition to school period, GRT parents heavily struggle with factors such as discrimination and poverty. GRT parents expressed that financial constraints

often limit their access to quality education. Some parents also felt their child's teacher showed disinterest, further discouraging engagement. Additionally, parents encountered barriers such as being turned away due to a lack of available space in preschools, making it more difficult to even gain access to ECE. GRT parents also expressed concerns about their child being labelled as having additional needs or facing racist bullying. It seems discouragement from the majority population and their own negative experiences in school may contribute to their hesitance in engaging with ECE. A lack of cultural awareness was also experienced by some GRT parents, making them feel unwelcome and misunderstood within the educational system.

Subtheme 4—Parents' emotions

Despite parents feeling both negative and positive emotions throughout their experiences with ECE, there remains a determination for improvement in their own relationship with education for their children's sake. GRT parents expressed pride in their children's accomplishments in preschool, reflecting a positive connection to their educational journey. However, many parents reported having negative, unhappy and disappointing experiences during their own schooling, which has left them feeling hurt that their family's culture is not adequately represented in schools. Despite these feelings, they hold a strong hope and determination for their child's education, striving for better outcomes for the next generation. While parents felt comfort and support from their child's preschool environment, some experienced discomfort and apprehension when their children transitioned to primary school.

Overall the findings within this theme align with the wider ECE literature that highlights how children's positive experiences of belonging, participation, learning and supportive relationships with educators contribute to stronger educational engagement and developmental outcomes (EASNIE, 2017). Simultaneously this theme describes GRT parents' mixed experiences with ECE encompassing both positive involvement in their child's early learning and the internal experience of struggling to reconcile with their own strained past experience with education, which is widely acknowledged in broader literature that explores parental engagement and intergenerational effects of education (Agupusi, 2019).

DISCUSSION

A total of five peer-reviewed studies went through the selection process, data analysis and data extraction. These studies were thematically analysed using NVivo, in relation to the following research aims to: (1) uncover facilitators of GRT's engagement in ECE, (2) uncover barriers of GRT's engagement in ECE and (3) map the experiences of GRT's regarding ECE. Using thematic analysis, five overarching themes were identified from the qualitative results of the included studies. These themes were external facilitators, internal facilitators, external barriers, internal barriers and experiences. Each theme contained three to five subthemes. A synthesis of key findings across the themes and subthemes pointed to three major implications for research, practice and policy, which are GRT cultural inclusion and awareness, school community support and legislation and policy.

GRT cultural inclusion and awareness

The thematic analysis uncovered the importance of GRT cultural representation and GRT parent involvement and participation as well as the positive experiences GRT parents have had with cultural exchanges in ECE. This implies that a major aspect of engagement in ECE for the GRT families was the importance of cultural inclusion and awareness in the ECE setting.

Cultural inclusion and awareness were central to the facilitators of engagement. GRT parents who are included in classroom participation and decision making enriched learning and social skills for all children in the setting by diversifying the children's interactions (Boyle, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2018; Boyle, Hanafin, & Flynn, 2018; Khalfaoui et al., 2020). Including GRT families in the narrative of the classroom, whether that be decision making or participation, has been shown to improve student attainment and social relationships in diverse settings such as in ECE, ultimately leaving a lasting positive impact on children and families (Khalfaoui et al., 2020). The more that GRT families are involved, the better educators are able to understand their culture, ultimately building cultural awareness (Boyle, Hanafin, & Flynn, 2018).

The literature on cultural inclusion indicates that creating space in the curriculum for GRT families to share their culture through storytelling, crafts or language demonstrations can strengthen representation of GRT culture inside the classroom. Inclusion and awareness needs also be present at the curricular level, including classroom materials that represent and highlight GRT culture. Barriers present in this study suggest there is not enough ethnic inclusivity for the GRT community (Boyle, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2018). A key approach to cultivating change is CRP. CRP incorporates teaching practices that assist educators in navigating cultural diversity through the promotion of social justice and cultural inclusion (Pappamihel & Moreno, 2011). Ladson-Billings (1995) defined CRP as implementing cultural components in: 'curriculum content, instructional techniques, learning framework, classroom climate, classroom management, student-teacher relationships, and performance assessment'. However, without adequate teacher training on GRT culture and inclusive practice or policy and legislation supporting the infrastructure of the ECE programme, inclusive curriculum change is difficult to implement.

School community support

A further implication emerging from study was the importance of school community support. The thematic analysis uncovered that school and teacher support, cultural brokering, positive teacher ideals and positive parent/teacher relationships acted as catalysts for GRT engagement in ECE (Boyle, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2018; Boyle, Hanafin, & Flynn, 2018; Khalfaoui et al., 2020; Klaus & Siraj, 2020). Furthermore, teacher disinterest in GRT families along with GRT parents' negative interactions with education contributed to the overall resistance to ECE. This implies that in order to support and strengthen the engagement with GRT families, ECE settings must create a sense of community that is welcoming, inclusive and trusting while also providing physical support such as educational resources. GRT families and their children need to feel like they belong in the school and in the classroom after generations of feeling excluded. It is important for educators to be aware that many GRT families might have had traumatic experiences themselves in school, or dropped out at an early age contributing to their overall apprehension and mistrust of the education system (Boyle, Flynn, & Hanafin, 2018). A broader view implies that many members of the GRT population feel that social institutions, such as school, are not designed with the same priorities or aims they might hold themselves (Hemselsoet, 2015). As explored in Klaus and Siraj (2020) cultural brokering study, the process of hiring educators who are GRT, could be a mitigator in bridging the culture gap and strengthening the school community support system. Inclusion of GRT staff benefits children, families and other educators alike by providing a culturally knowledgeable individual who can support attendance, enrolment and educational outcomes for GRT families. In addition to this, non GRT educators must be informed or trained in GRT culture to understand their overall role in creating a school that stands on community and support for ethnic minorities creating not only equality but also equity for their students.

Legislation and policy change

The last implication drawn from the study that will be discussed is the need for legislation and policy to address issues that emerged from the analysis including prejudice, financial means, accessibility and overall parent negative experiences with these barriers. Europe has worked towards change in legislation and policy for GRT children and families in education, such as with the 2020–2030 EU Roma Strategic Framework for Equality, Inclusion and Participation. This framework encourages a joint effort across European countries to prioritise GRT education by combating anti-gypsyism by creating legal protections against discrimination and allocating additional funding to GRT education programmes. With these aims in mind, the framework works to reduce school segregation of GRT, increase engagement and participation of GRT children and overall provide equal access to education for GRT families.

However, the uptake of the EU framework demonstrates a mismatch in values that each country within Europe holds and how change is managed at national and local levels. National governments are responsible for interpreting and operationalising European policy goals, and this process varies considerably in terms of strategy clarity, funding and enforcement. Where national strategies are weak or under-resourced, local authorities could potentially face greater difficulties in implementing inclusive measures. The 2024 assessment report of the framework states 'progress is slow, and more efforts are needed' (European Commission, 2024). Critiques of the framework from the European Commission also include ineffective use of funding, limited impact on reducing school segregation and persistent anti-gypsyism at a structural level. An additional critique argues that a lack of sufficient engagement with Roma communities has resulted in initiatives that don't fully align with the communities' specific needs and realities (European Commission, 2024).

These policy concerns must be addressed to make GRT engagement in education equal and effective. Europe must ensure that countries at the local level are being held accountable for implementing their proposed schemes to meet the standard of the EU policy. Local policies should include stronger anti-discrimination enforcement and training for educators on inclusive practices. A suggestion of implementing standards of inclusive education across EU countries can create a united and welcoming environment for Roma students and reduce stigmatisation. This all must be first addressed at the European level before even beginning to see change within the ECE sector.

Limitations and future research

The overall topic of this review has not been well researched by others in the education sector. To combat this, first the authors created a broad search criteria and an inclusive search string in an effort to capture as much as possible on the topic in hopes of answering the research questions. However, there was scarcity in the research results, contributing to a small sample. A second limitation of the study was the geographic scope. Europe is a large continent with unique and nuanced societies. Individual countries may not feel that the results collected and analysed represent them or their ideals on ECE engagement within the GRT community. A third limitation within the study is that, in some cases, findings reflect evidence from a single study or from studies conducted within a single national context. Therefore, the relative strength or frequency of particular barriers and facilitators cannot be interpreted as equivalent across the evidence base. However, given the very limited research available, this review analysed the corpus in its entirety in order to identify recurring themes and highlight gaps for future investigation. Fourth, was the choice to exclude using quality ECE as an analytical framework and instead limit the focus to engagement. Quality is a key focal point in the ECE field as outlined in Sustainable Development

Goal 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education (United Nations, 2025). There is overlap between engagement and quality, with many similar elements emphasising meaningful participation, inclusion and belonging in ECE (EASNIE, 2017). Future research aims to explore how broader European perspectives intersect with, or diverge from, the narratives and realities of local contexts within specific countries with high GRT populations and perhaps explore this through a quality analytical framework.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this systematic review set out to explore three main objectives which were to uncover facilitators, barriers and experiences that aid in GRT's engagement in ECE and care. The findings synthesised perspectives of GRT families, pedagogical assistants, educators and ECE experts, revealing how internal and external factors intersect to influence engagement. Five overarching themes including: 'external facilitators, internal facilitators, external barriers, internal barriers and experiences' provided insight into structural or relational conditions that support or undermine ECE engagement.

Three major implications that represent the data and themes across the studies are GRT cultural inclusion and awareness, school community support, and legislation and policy. In order to accomplish change for GRT families and their engagement levels within ECE, it is crucial that ECE settings and teachers create ways to include GRT culture inside the classroom and, while doing so, increase their own knowledge, becoming aware of needs and supporting these families that may require. In addition to this, ECE settings and teachers must work towards a supportive school community that is able to ensure a welcoming environment that is built on networks of trust between the setting and GRT families to mend a history of mistrust between the two. The last implication suggests the use of policy and legislation to not only devise and implement ways in which to support cultural inclusion and awareness along with school community support but also to aid in decreasing other barriers that still plague the GRT population when it comes to engaging with ECE, such as prejudice and financial means. This review has the potential to inform ECE educators, settings, stakeholders, and policymakers in understanding the lived experiences of GRT families, what facilitators can do to ensure greater uptake and engagement with ECE, and what barriers are present in order to create pathways of change for Europe's largest minority group.

This work is important as it addresses a significant gap in the ECE field which is the experiences of Europe's largest and most educationally marginalised minority (Rutigliano, 2020). By situating GRT ECE engagement within broader debates of equity, access, inclusion and participation this review extends current academic progress on culturally responsive practice and uncovers ways in which systemic discrimination may continue to constrain educational opportunities. By consolidating the body of research done on GRT engagement in ECE, identifying recurring themes across studies and exploring how these themes intersect with national and local policy contexts, the review contributes to the limited, but growing literature on the subject.

Future directions for research on ECE engagement for the GRT population includes a need for more child-centred longitudinal research that investigates the impact of early engagement for GRT children along with practice-based interventions that embrace the input of GRT individuals in designing inclusive ECE materials, curriculum and design. Addressing these gaps will work to advance the field of ECE while also contributing to broader societal goals that promote social justice and equity for marginalised communities across Europe.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Sara Ponce: Conceptualization; methodology; investigation; funding acquisition; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; visualization; resources; project administration; software; data curation. **Ryan Alberto Gibbons:** Formal analysis. **Jennifer Symonds:** Conceptualization; supervision; methodology; writing – review and editing; validation. **Seaneen Sloan:** Conceptualization; methodology; writing – review and editing; supervision.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available upon request. A protocol was registered and is available in Prospero (CRD42024510491).

ETHICS STATEMENT

This research was reviewed and approved by the UCD Human Research Ethics Committee, University College Dublin, in accordance with UCD's ethical guidelines and policies. All procedures were conducted with full adherence to ethical standards, ensuring respect, confidentiality and protection.

AI DECLARATION

No AI tools were used in the preparation of this work.

ETHICS AND INTEGRITY POLICY

The authors affirm that they abide by the ethical principles laid out by BERA and upholding the integrity standards by BERA. The BERA ethical guidelines recognise and celebrate the diversity of approaches in educational research and promote respect for all those involved, including researchers, participants, academics, professional practitioners, commissioning bodies and those who engage with the research outcomes. This research submission reflects a vigorous attention to ethics and integrity that is aligned with BERA.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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