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**To cite this article:** Maria Papakosma (06 May 2026): Barriers to inclusion of culturally diverse families in Swedish ECEC: pre-school leaders' perspectives, European Early Childhood Education Research Journal, DOI: [10.1080/1350293X.2026.2667918](https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2026.2667918)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2026.2667918>



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Published online: 06 May 2026.



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# Barriers to inclusion of culturally diverse families in Swedish ECEC: pre-school leaders' perspectives

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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to examine pre-school principals' perceptions of inclusive practices and the barriers to inclusion for culturally and linguistically diverse children and families in early childhood education and care (ECEC). Drawing on interviews with 21 pre-school principals in a Swedish metropolitan area with high cultural and linguistic diversity, this study employs Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional social justice framework to analyse how exclusion operates through failures of redistribution, recognition, and representation. The findings indicate that while principals perceive inclusion as embedded in transformative practices within the pre-school context, they identify various exclusion mechanisms beyond ECEC's institutional role to address. These barriers operate through precarious economic and housing conditions, digital infrastructure and linguistic constraints, coordination gaps and sustained spatial segregation. The study contributes to understanding exclusion in ECEC and highlights that achieving inclusion requires multi-level policy coordination and systemic transformation rather than pre-school-level interventions alone.

## KEYWORDS



Inclusion; structural barriers; exclusion; pre-school principals; social justice; Sweden

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

SDG 10: reduced inequalities

## Introduction

This paper examines how pre-school principals understand and describe inclusion practices while identifying barriers to inclusion for culturally and linguistically diverse families and children. Over the years, growing attention in policy and research has emphasised the importance of children's participation in pre-school as a foundation for success in later life, especially for children living in disadvantaged societal conditions. The European, international and Nordic policy agenda for early childhood education and care (ECEC) has established this as a key priority to promote social sustainability and inclusiveness (Council of the European Union 2019; Nordic Council of Ministers 2024; OECD 2023). The most recent Eurydice report on ECEC in Europe devotes specific chapters to targeted measures and interventions for children of disadvantaged

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backgrounds and participation with the intention to bridge existing gaps, foster equal opportunities and address the barriers encountered by children at risk of social exclusion (European Commission 2025).

Research has demonstrated that inclusion and exclusion are critically intertwined. Inclusion is considered a key aspect of democracy (Biesta 2007; Harðardóttir 2023) connected to issues of social justice and equality (Kuusisto 2017) with education playing a critical role in sustaining integration and social cohesion within a nation. Nevertheless, participation and involvement at pre-schools should not be conflated since they share distinct characteristics while participation does not always lead to inclusive practices (Vandenbroeck 2010; Warming 2011). In the context of increased cultural and linguistic diversity, well-being and involvement constitute crucial factors for high-quality ECEC services with the intention of fostering a sense of belonging for children and their families as core elements of social sustainability (Berge and Johansson 2021; Johansson and Rosell 2021). Yet, there is limited knowledge about how multiple forms of marginalisation and diversity intersect in ECEC contexts (Garvis and Arniika 2021). To this regard, understanding the factors that prevent pre-schools from fulfilling their inclusive mission becomes critical.

The paper moves beyond the emphasis on increasing participation and enrolling families from disadvantaged backgrounds and their children at pre-schools as sufficient for achieving social justice. It is concerned with how multifaceted understandings of social justice can support a more nuanced conceptualisation of how exclusion operates across multiple dimensions and policy sectors. For this purpose, the paper draws on Nancy Fraser's three-dimensional framework of justice (Fraser 2007, 2008; Fraser and Honneth 2003) as a lens to examine how structural barriers operate at multiple levels within Swedish pre-schools, preventing the effective inclusion and participation of children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Challenges persist regarding unequal access as well as inadequate quality services for enrolled children. Research within ECEC identifies these barriers to equality that correspond to Fraser's three justice dimensions: redistribution failures through segregation and resource inequities within ECEC systems (Fjellborg and Forsberg 2023; OECD 2025), recognition failures manifested in the marginalisation and invisibility of disadvantaged children experiencing socioeconomic challenges (see Barco and Carrasco 2020; Bove and Sharmahd 2020; Vandenbroeck and Lazzari 2014), and representation failures through policy fragmentation that fail to address the other two (Urban 2016; Vandenbroeck 2024). More specifically, research on partnerships with immigrant families shows complex barriers that constrain inclusion in ECEC contexts such as language barriers, asymmetrical power relations between professionals and parents and cultural differences in partnership expectations (Antony-Newman 2019; Norheim and Moser 2020). In the Nordic context, despite universal ECEC systems, barriers persist regarding communication practices with multilingual families and value conflicts, highlighting the need for teacher preparation for diversity work and professional development (Garvis and Harju-Luukkainen 2024; Lastikka 2019; Lunneblad and Johansson 2012; Ragnarsdóttir 2021).

Sweden constitutes an interesting case of exploring the tension between a national equity-discursive agenda and the implementation challenges of diversity ECEC policies. The country has experienced big demographic shifts in recent decades. The foreign-born

population was raised from 7% in 1980 to 20% by 2020 (SOU [Swedish Government Official Reports] 2025:9). According to statistics, 40% of Sweden's student population across all educational levels has a foreign background, with the majority born in Sweden to foreign-born parent(s) (Statistics Sweden [SCB] 2020). At the same time, national authorities' reports show (i) high numbers of pre-school segregation between children with a foreign and Swedish background as a result of housing segregation (Swedish National Agency for Education 2025a); (ii) low attendance patterns in these areas (SALAR 2024), signalling recognition that achieving equitable conditions at pre-schools is still far from reach. While participation is high (over 95% for 4- to 5-year-olds, Swedish National Agency for Education 2022), the enrolment rate for children with foreign backgrounds, mainly newly-arrived and foreign-born children, is considered low (SOU [Swedish Government Official Reports] 2020:67). Pre-schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas have a high proportion of children with foreign backgrounds and face significant challenges in recruiting qualified educators with strong Swedish language skills (Garvis and Lunneblad 2018; Sandell 2021; SOU [Swedish Government Official Reports] 2020:67).

In terms of accessibility, Sweden ensures a place in pre-school for every child after the end of their parents' childcare leave and household fees are based on a percentage of their total income, with an average of 3% in 2023 (European Commission 2025). All in all, Swedish ECEC is characterised by one of the highest levels of public investment and commitment in Europe (European Commission 2025), an orientation that has currently been accompanied by an intensified policy discursive emphasis on increased participation and enhanced language development in Swedish (Govt. Bill 2021/22:132). This targets children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas where multiple challenges intersect.

While there has been a growing amount of research, internationally and nationally, investigating the views of immigrant parents, pre-school staff and children (Migdad, Lea, and Sjøen 2025; Norheim et al. 2024; Peleman, Vandebroek, and Van Avermaet 2020; Sevón et al. 2025; Van Laere and Vandebroek 2017) also in relation to issues of inclusion/exclusion in ECEC, there has been limited attention to the voices of principals in the field. Pre-school principals offer a distinct institutional lens for examining the structural barriers to inclusion since they have the ultimate responsibility for children's rights and educational equity. In the Swedish context, they have received greater autonomy and expanded responsibilities, with recent national guidelines emphasising their leadership role in implementing diversity policies with implications for equity, especially in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (Swedish National Agency for Education 2025b). A growing body of literature internationally and in the Nordic context views principals as important leadership agents with a social justice agenda, yet contextual factors complicate their efforts to mediate between social issues and political agendas (Svavarsson et al. 2016; Zembylas and Iasonos 2017).

The study, therefore, addresses this gap and responds to the call of scholarship to explore further the issues of inclusion and exclusion in ECEC by addressing the following research questions:

- (a) How do pre-school principals perceive the inclusion of culturally and linguistically diverse families and children in ECEC?

- (b) What barriers do they identify as constraining the inclusion in socioeconomically disadvantaged settings?

Through analysing principals' experiences and institutional practices, this study contributes knowledge on how exclusionary mechanisms are produced and sustained in Swedish ECEC and with what implications for inclusive practice.

## Theoretical framework

The study draws on Fraser's framework as a lens for analysing social justice. Fraser conceptualises social justice as 'parity of participation', requiring a 'dismantling (of) institutionalised obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others, as full partners in social interaction' (Fraser 2008, 16). In early childhood contexts specifically, Fenech and Skattebol (2021) draw on Fraser's framework to demonstrate that inclusion for low-income families extends beyond enrolment, demanding transformative practices.

Fraser (2007, 2008) argues that achieving participatory parity requires addressing three inter-connected dimensions of justice: redistribution, recognition and representation. Redistribution is related to the fair distribution of wealth and resources. It addresses economic justice and issues of class differences, poverty and inequality (Fraser and Honneth 2003). Recognition refers to the cultural dimension of justice and concerns the respect and validation of the unique perspectives of various groups by questioning the institutionalised hierarchies of cultural dominance. Fraser (2007) related cultural injustice and exclusion to having its roots in the status-order and framed it as misrecognition. When people experience class structure and cultural subordination, challenging the status hierarchies that deny certain groups equal value is required.

Representation concerns the political dimension of justice and manifests in processes of decision-making about who is entitled to make claims for redistribution and recognition, and how such claims should be deliberated. Another form of misrepresentation, according to Fraser, is misframing. This occurs when individuals are excluded from the political processes determining who can make justice claims and under what conditions.

Fraser further highlights the complex and multifaceted nature and mechanisms of structural exclusion which manifest across different policy domains. She distinguishes between marginalisation (where people participate but not as peers) and exclusion (where people cannot participate at all), arguing that 'being excluded, after all, is considerably worse than being included but marginalised ... Those who are excluded, by contrast, are not even in the game' (Fraser 2007, 315).

Following this framework, this study examines structural barriers to the inclusion/exclusion of children and their families identified by pre-school principals, analysing how injustices across redistribution, recognition and representation operate.

## Methodology

The study draws on a qualitative research study that explored pre-school principals' experiences of working with diverse families and children in linguistically and

socioeconomically diverse settings. The analysis examines these through the lens of inclusive practices and the factors that hinder their realisation. I conducted 21 in-depth interviews with pre-school principals (10) and vice principals (11) in a large metropolitan area in Sweden characterised by high socioeconomic variation, focusing on highly culturally and linguistically diverse areas.

I used purposive sampling (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison 2018) for the selection of principals. Most participants were responsible for multiple pre-schools across different areas or had previous experience working in socioeconomically disadvantaged contexts. The majority of pre-schools that the principals led had either around half of the children with a home language other than Swedish or mainly children from multilingual families, in some cases children speaking three or four languages at home. These pre-schools were located in areas with high concentrations of immigrant families, ranging from moderate to very high levels. Only a couple of pre-schools presented lower levels of linguistic diversity. Municipalities were identified through publicly available demographic statistics and pre-schools through municipal websites based on geographical location. Pre-school principals were then contacted via email. The interviews, conducted through video conferencing, lasted approximately 45–60 min. The interviews started with principals describing their current role and responsibilities and the contextual characteristics of the pre-schools they serve. These descriptions allowed in-depth discussions about principals' work with diversity policies and diverse families and children, the challenges they encountered, the factors enabling or constraining their work in pursuing children's and families' participation as well as support for multilingualism.

The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Creswell 2014) combined with a subsequent interpretive approach through the lens of social justice. After familiarisation with the data, I coded themes related to principals' perspectives on working with diverse families and the constraints they encountered. Themes were organised into two broad thematic categories: (i) perceptions of inclusive pre-school practices and (ii) structural barriers to inclusion. Within the barriers category, the identified subthemes (precarity conditions and exclusion, lack of resources and coordination gaps, linguistic barriers, and spatial segregation and misrecognition), were interpreted through Fraser's (2007, 2008) three-dimensional justice framework.

The study followed the Swedish Research Council's (2024) ethical guidelines. Participants received detailed written information regarding the study while informed consent was obtained before interviews. To protect the participants' confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information (pre-school names, municipal locations) was removed from the transcripts. Specific pre-school demographic details were intentionally omitted to prevent identification. Moreover, in selected quotes participants were identified numerically (Participant 1, Participant 2) while municipalities and areas were identified alphabetically (Municipality Y, Municipality X). I maintained reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis, particularly regarding how my own positioning and assumptions about diversity and inclusion might shape interpretations of participants' accounts. This included careful engagement with the data, returning to transcripts multiple times and examining principals' perspectives in relation to existing ECEC inclusion/exclusion literature.

## Findings

This section presents the findings of the study, organised into two parts: first, it examines pre-school principals' descriptions of inclusive ECEC, and second, it analyses the structural barriers that hinder inclusion through Fraser's (2008) justice framework.

### *Principals' perceptions of inclusive ECEC: the bridging role of pre-school*

Principals' accounts collectively reflect a shared vision about pre-school functioning as a bridge for children and their families with a culturally and linguistically diverse background to the Swedish society. Apart from the educational mandate, pre-school is 'like a society in miniature' with 'a mandate to be a societal actor' contributing to active citizenship (Participant 10) and creating 'trust and security with each other, to then show that society can also create this to them, as a path to participation' (Participant 4). All principals conceptualised pre-school's societal role grounded in the notions of diversity and equity, with one principal explicitly framing this through a humanistic approach. Within this shared understanding, several principals emphasised that inclusion requires more than pedagogical approaches to children.

It's still some kind of foundation in view of humanity. We often talk about view of children. But we need to talk just as much about view of humanity. Because it concerns adults too. That people become in different situations in different ways. Not that they are this and that. (Participant 3)

This view of humanity informs asset-based approaches to cultural and linguistic diversity that enrich Sweden rather than deficits to overcome, illustrating that the process of 'becoming' rather than 'being' considers identity as fluid and contextual.

Moreover, the societal function of pre-school manifests in concrete practices to facilitate children and families' integration, including newly-arrived families and those with varied literacy backgrounds. This includes offering possibilities for families and children to navigate and experience society and encounter role models and opportunities to expand their horizons. Their engagement in the pre-school work is important for sustaining their participation and sense of belonging both within pre-schools and in Swedish society.

We sometimes do excursions to the forest perhaps, but sometimes to a museum somewhere ... Families also get, through their children, to experience society perhaps in a different way. It also becomes an opportunity for the family to be curious about what the children have experienced and take the initiative too: 'yes, my child has been there and there, then we do the same thing on the weekend'. (Participant15)

preschool is integrating in the sense that even if I have a mother who is illiterate and doesn't work, I still see women who work at the preschool. So, it has a distributing effect in the sense that you get other role models. (Participant 10)

The role of pre-school is thus conceptualised as a gateway opening new possibilities to what is available both to children and parents. This distributing effect is also described as pre-school creating spaces for children to experience different realities offering 'hope for the future' (Participant 18). Other principals also narrated how concrete practices

translate into empowering parents, such as helping them learn the Swedish language and, by extension, finding a job.

We also think of our parents as becoming strong and feeling pride in leaving their child with us ... We have book bags so that parents can engage with literacy at home ... If you can't read – because we have parents who can't read – describe what you see, talk with your child as an adult ... It becomes such a nice relationship with the parents and the educators. (Participant 9)

This view of inclusive ECEC as transformative space connects to the role of ECEC as bridging social and cultural gaps by establishing relational strategies. Principals' perceptions for inclusion, therefore, suggest enabling social participation and creating pathways to different resources and experiences that respond to the needs of their diverse communities.

### ***Structural barriers of exclusion beyond ECEC's scope***

Despite principals' inclusive perceptions and practices, exclusionary factors that extend beyond their control hinder effective and sustainable inclusion of children and families experiencing precarious employment and housing conditions, economic adversity, linguistic barriers and social marginalisation as identified by the participants.

### ***Precarious conditions and exclusion***

The majority of principals in the study articulated several factors that prevented children and families from achieving what Fraser (2008) conceptualises as participatory parity, reflecting failures of redistribution, with insecure legal and economic status as a key barrier. Within this group, principals differed in their emphasis with some highlighting sporadic attendance as the primary concern, while others described a more complex pattern of discontinuity affecting family engagement.

Children who live in Sweden, or here in the area, for a shorter time. They start preschool and then receive notification that they're not allowed to stay, or that they might be deported again. Or they don't have the possibility to continue living right here, but must settle further away, in another municipality. It's sad for the children who perhaps don't get this continuity. (Participant 15)

This illustrates that continuity is not equally distributed due to the cumulative precarious conditions that disrupt children's attendance in pre-schools. In addition, uncertain employment and housing conditions contribute to unequal opportunities for children's participation at pre-school. Several principals contrasted these conditions with neighbouring affluent areas.

Many parents don't have permanent employment but work a lot when they're called in, so these are very uncertain conditions that the children live under. You don't know if you're going to preschool at nine o'clock today or at half past six – it's uncertain what you'll encounter all the time. (Participant 6)

At two of our preschools, we have much more second-maybe even third-hand rental contracts (subletting arrangements) and a lot of people moving out. Many guardians don't speak Swedish as their mother tongue, so we see quite a big difference there. (Participant 11)

This economic and housing precarity create multiple intersecting barriers that extend beyond pre-school's capacity to address. In this regard, injustices across Fraser's three dimensions intersect. Representation failures in immigration and housing decisions create redistribution failures (such as housing and economic instability) and recognition failures since families are treated as temporary, disregarding children's need for continuity.

### ***Lack of resources and coordination gaps***

Another example of redistribution failure is connected to the lack of resources such as time, skills and emotional resources to work with diversity and inclusion at pre-schools. While the majority of principals framed diversity through an asset-based lens, most of these same principals also referred to critical gaps in temporal, financial, and human resources necessary to engage with intercultural and inclusion work and enhance inclusion across linguistic, cultural and socioeconomic conditions. One principal described the tension between inclusive intentions and resource realities.

Diversity is fun when you have time and can work with it in peace and quiet. But when you don't have that time, diversity becomes the reason for lots of conflicts that are very difficult to solve ... It's very good when you feel well but when you feel bad, you can't take in anything at all - you just react. It's a very big challenge that many don't really talk about. (Participant 13)

Most principals also refer to the challenges their educators face to 'suffice', namely having the time, energy and resources to correspond to children's needs. These resource constraints stem from municipal budget decisions regarding staff allocation and resource distribution, connecting to Fraser's (2008) redistribution injustice.

According to some principals, these resource limitations at the pre-school-level connect to broader questions of how ECEC is prioritised and recognised in official policy frameworks. Beyond resource limitations, three of them identified an inter-connected and broader challenge, namely the lack of multi-level coordination, as an obstacle that prevents meaningful and just responses to families' needs even when individual institutions or principals are motivated to act.

To talk about multiculturalism is not done in five minutes... I think that one needs to connect it with levels above, so that there's a mutual understanding moving forward, an interaction ... It's not a principal or an assistant principal who can solve these complex issues alone. It's difficult to reinvent the wheel on your own. We work with those adaptations we can and try to be creative, but I think another type of collaboration would be needed to be able to support these children. (Participant 15)

I think there is an understanding that preschool is important at the national level, but I don't think it's taken as seriously as I would like ... This says something about the view on both importance and competence and the conditions that should exist for this to make a difference. (Participant 19)

This shows how resource limitations and recognition failures at higher governance levels create a gap between valuing pre-school's role rhetorically and providing adequate support to achieve inclusion. The need for coordination with 'levels above' demonstrates that despite principals trying to 'offer help beyond what their mandate sometimes extends to' (Participant 4), when other types of collaboration remain unaddressed,

inclusion efforts remain fragmented and insufficient. What Fraser (2008) terms participatory parity cannot be achieved through individual efforts alone when families face exclusion through failures in redistribution, recognition, and representation operating across multiple policy domains beyond ECEC's reach.

### *Linguistic barriers*

Linguistic barriers constitute another important factor that leads to communication constraints and eventually limits inclusion in pre-school settings. These challenges manifested both in relation to pre-schools' digital infrastructure and availability of interpreters at pre-schools. A few principals explained how the school platform they use

is written in Swedish and then there's quite a lot that parents can't read and access unless you meet in the hallway and tell them ... They don't understand our documents that we send out. They can't meet our requirements to fill in digital attendance. We have parents who don't have personal identity numbers and can't have BankID (Sweden's national digital identification system). And it becomes difficult to explain the preschool curriculum. (Participant 10)

This demonstrates how even well-intended systems can create exclusion since they become inaccessible to non-Swedish speaking parents. The requirements for digital identification and lack of interpersonal numbers indicate what Fraser (2008) argues as a redistribution failure since lack of access to information necessary for participation based on administrative status and infrastructure policies is beyond ECEC's control. Another limitation that several principals identified was inadequate access to interpreters since interpretation services could not always provide interpreters in all children's languages.

You can't have an interpreter at every occasion. We help each other between preschools because we have quite a few staff members whose mother tongue is not Swedish. (Participant 5)

Some principals, though, explained how this unavailability of both interpreters and multilingual staff affected their ability to communicate adequately in cases requiring reports to social authorities. Relying on simplified Swedish for complex information illustrates redistribution and recognition failures that require structural intervention (Fraser 2008).

### *'A political mistake': spatial segregation and misrecognition*

The mechanisms of exclusion extend beyond redistribution to injustices in recognition (Fraser 2008) that are closely intertwined with spatial segregation and stigma. While most participants in their description touch upon issues of spatial segregation and their role in inclusion/exclusion in ECEC, one of them specifically refers to political failure to counteract segregation.

I think this is very problematic because they (children) are born here, so they belong here. Do children from municipality Y come here to municipality X? No, they absolutely don't ... When I worked in area W, there was a teacher who wanted to have a partner preschool in the city center. We couldn't find any school that wanted to be partners with us and when I pushed a bit, that principal said 'off the record' that the parents wouldn't appreciate it ... You can feel from the other side that they don't want to ... For me it's important that the

children experience *X* and Sweden as their home ... Everything that exists here around us is equally right and has just as much value as everything else ... But really, this is a political mistake. (Participant 4)

This example reflects, according to Fraser (2008), an institutionalised misrecognition where stigmatisation of certain groups is embedded both in policy and practice. Spatial segregation marks specific neighbourhoods and their residents as outsiders requiring integration despite being born in Sweden, problematising the framing of the integration discourse. The failed friendship school attempt is indicative of how exclusion comes from or is maintained by affluent areas' avoidance patterns. Pre-school, in that respect, becomes a site of resistance that reinforces a sense of belonging to their community and country by instilling a justice-oriented perspective. This cultural misrecognition is also identified by several principals who describe their areas as being heard and seen in the media referring to criminality issues.

But here we don't have a single ethnically Swedish child in this area. There are some mixed – meaning where the mother or father is Swedish – but none where both parents are Swedish. We had that a few years ago, but that's become less dense. (Participant 19)

Another principal shows how these areas are perceived as.

an avoidance area. People don't choose to put their children in that preschool; rather, it's those who live nearby who end up there. (Participant 5)

These patterns indicate how residential patterns, segregation, media representation, choice patterns reflect the social stigma that leads to exclusion. These recognition failures operate cumulatively through immigration, housing policies, unstable and economically precarious conditions that go against the vision of an inclusive ECEC and strongly suggest that this is not an issue that the pre-school sector alone can address. [Table 1](#)

**Table 1.** Application of Fraser's framework to structural barriers in Swedish ECEC.

Fraser dimension	Type of injustice	Barriers identified by the principles	Intervention level
Redistribution	Economic/ material	Housing instability/ Deportation Precarious employment disrupting attendance	Housing, immigration, labour policy coordination
Recognition	Cultural	Digital exclusion (BankID) Linguistic barriers Interpreters' shortages Swedish platforms	Digital infrastructure, resource allocation, multilingual platforms/systems
Representation	Participatory	Cross-sectoral fragmentation Lack of coordination mechanisms	Governance structures
Redistribution and misrecognition	Economic/ cultural	Spatial segregation Avoidance  and stigmatisation of disadvantaged areas	Housing planning, school choice regulation

synthesises these barriers through Fraser's framework, showing the need for policy interventions across several sectors.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper highlights the complexities of inclusion in Swedish ECEC and the multifaceted nature of the barriers that lead to different forms of exclusion and social injustice for families with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Despite international and national policy commitments to inclusion in ECEC, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds, the voices of pre-school principals are often absent in these debates. This study contributes to ECEC inclusion research by examining how principals responsible for implementing inclusive practices identify structural barriers linked to broader socioeconomic inequalities. Using Fraser's (2008) framework as a lens to examine social justice, the study shows that inclusion is difficult to achieve due to failures across redistribution, recognition, and representation, demonstrating why pre-school-level interventions alone cannot achieve inclusion without multiple coordination across various policy sectors. The findings challenge policy emphasis on enrolment rates by showing how structural factors such as immigration status, housing instability, digital infrastructure and segregation constrain meaningful participation even after families access ECEC.

The manifestations of exclusion as articulated through principals' accounts are multifaceted. Principals' accounts are grounded in existing segregation research in the Nordic context (Bunar and Anna 2016; Fjellborg and Forsberg 2023; Stjernberg et al. 2025) by illustrating specific mechanisms through which exclusion occurs for culturally and linguistically diverse families. These are families facing deportation threats, parents in precarious employment conditions and children whose attendance is disrupted due to frequent housing moves. Principals in disadvantaged areas thus have to deal with different intersecting factors in what Fraser (2008) terms redistribution failures that concern housing, immigration and labour policies, beyond pre-school's mandate.

In addition, digital platforms and linguistic barriers constitute layered forms of exclusion that principals identify, preventing families from accessing information and participating in pre-schools. Digital exclusions stem from national infrastructure requirements that exclude families who lack personal identity numbers or Swedish literacy, confirming research on digital barriers for immigrant families (Notley and Aziz 2024). Moreover, while research emphasises bilingual staff and translators as solutions to linguistic barriers (Norheim and Moser 2020), principals face interpreter shortages forcing them to communicate in simplified Swedish even for complex conversations with the social authorities. These resource constraints reflect broader systemic barriers to inclusion and corroborate previous research in Swedish ECEC (Ginner Hau, Selenius, and Åkesson 2022), in what Fraser (2008) terms as recognition failures requiring structural intervention.

At a governance level, some principals highlight the absence of coordination as an impeding factor to the fulfilment of pre-school's complex mission. The findings above align with Urban's (2016) critique of incoherent policy approaches to inclusion in ECEC. He argues that despite proclaimed commitments to quality ECEC, it can only reach its potential with adequate systemic support. However, as Urban observes,

different policy areas often ‘exist in parallel universes with little or no interdepartmental communication, let alone coordination’ (Urban 2016, 411). This lack of coordination confirms what principals in this study identified as an obstacle to inclusion and equity, addressing the need for greater collaboration and interaction across governance levels to address the complex nature of structural barriers that diverse families face, along with the provision of resources for educators to meet children’s needs. Therefore, responses should be established within a wider framework of inclusion to remove barriers and target marginalisation and segregation (UNESCO 2021).

Another point of consideration is the emerging hierarchies of privilege and what Fraser (2008) argues as misrecognition, where social stigma of certain groups sustains exclusion. Principals’ narratives reveal how affluent areas maintain segregation by avoiding disadvantaged areas, showing unwillingness to create relationships, as in the example of the failed friendship school attempt. Previous research confirms the avoidance patterns of native parents regarding pre-schools in these areas and the lack of willingness to address issues of desegregating pre-schools in relation to residential mixing at the policy level (Fjellborg and Forsberg 2022), together with issues of free choice and privatisation in urban municipalities that aggregate the problem (Fjellborg and Forsberg 2023). This reflects how policies can advocate inclusive rhetoric on diversity while sustaining practices that reproduce the inequalities and exclusion they claim to tackle (Vandenbroeck 2024). Such dynamics indicate how exclusion in disadvantaged areas does not only concern issues of language and culture, but class and spatial segregation.

Overall, the study identifies a tension between principals’ transformative perceptions of inclusion, embedded in the societal mission of ECEC and characterised by practices of bridging gaps, involvement, and creating a sense of belonging through trust, and the various barriers that prevent these from being realised. By exploring which children and families are excluded, how this exclusion operates across multiple dimensions of social justice, and why it persists despite principals’ inclusive practices, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of exclusion in Swedish ECEC.

These findings have implications for policy development and practice by illustrating that local compensatory approaches and individual efforts are insufficient to tackle educational inequalities. To this end, inclusive policies and participatory parity (Fraser 2008) for diverse families demand systemic governance and coordination within and across different policy sectors (such as immigration, housing, labour market). Moreover, attention should be given to digital infrastructure for multilingual accessibility. At the national and municipal level, pre-school segregation is a high-stake issue that requires more comprehensive measures. Enhanced ECEC practices alone, however well-intentioned, cannot overcome these structural barriers.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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