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Chasing the European Dream: Unaccompanied African Youths' Educational Experience in a Canary Islands' Reception Centre and Beyond

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Abstract: In the last two decades, Spain's Canary Islands have received thousands of undocumented migrants arriving by boat from the coasts of North and West Africa. The sharp increase of unaccompanied minors has presented a particular challenge, as these minors fall under the State's protection system and are entitled to an education and other rights, once in Spain. What economic and socio-cultural factors push these youth to seek a better life whilst endangering their own? What educational opportunities are available to them in Spain and how can these propel them into secure living situations? What can be said about their integration prospects? This ethnographic study, based on field research carried out in a reception centre for unaccompanied minors in Tenerife, focuses on the youth's migration trajectories, and on the extent to which the education and support they receive

in Spain relates to their socio-economic integration into European society and beyond. The findings reveal that although the centre provides the youth with a window of opportunity to be in Spain and gain an education, the ambiguousness of their legal situation brought about by immigration policies once they have left the centre, is not conducive to their leading a stable and productive life in the current context.

Keywords: youth; immigration; migration; intercultural education

Persiguiendo el sueño europeo: La experiencia educativa de jóvenes africanos no acompañados en un Centro de Recepción en las Islas Canarias y más allá.

Resumen: En las dos últimas décadas, las Islas Canarias han recibido miles de inmigrantes indocumentados, que llegan a las costas en botes desde el Norte y el Oeste de África. El aumento de menores extranjeros no acompañados presenta un desafío para el gobierno, pues al tratarse de menores en territorio español, el estado es el responsable de su guarda y tutela, y tiene que facilitarles protección y educación como cualquier otro menor. ¿Qué factores económicos y socioculturales empujan a estos jóvenes a poner en peligro sus vidas?; ¿qué oportunidades educativas tienen ellos en España, y cómo pueden ellos aprovechar esas situaciones para alcanzar un nivel mayor de bienestar?; ¿qué posibilidades de integración tienen en la sociedad española? Este estudio etnográfico, basado en una investigación llevada a cabo en un Centro de Acogida de Menores No Acompañados de Tenerife, se centra en las trayectorias migratorias de estos jóvenes, y en analizar en qué medida la educación y apoyo que reciben en España influye en su posterior integración laboral y social. Los resultados reflejan que, aunque el centro ofrece a los jóvenes bienestar y oportunidades educativas, la ambigüedad de sus situaciones jurídicas al cumplir la mayoría de edad, dependientes de las políticas de migración, no facilita mucho su desarrollo educativo e integración social posterior en el presente contexto.

Palabras clave: juventud; la inmigración; la migración; la educación intercultural

Perseguindo o sonho europeu: a experiência educacional de jovens Africano desacompanhadas de Centro de Recepção, nas Ilhas Canárias, e mais além.

Resumo: Nas últimas duas décadas, as Ilhas Canárias têm recebido milhares de imigrantes ilegais que chegam à costa em barcos do Norte e África Ocidental. Nascente crianças desacompanhadas apresenta um desafio para o governo, porque quando se trata de menores em território espanhol, o estado é responsável por seus cuidados e custódia, e deve fornecer-lhes proteção e educação como qualquer outra criança. Que fatores econômicos e socioculturais empurrar esses jovens colocam suas vidas em perigo?; Que oportunidades de educação que têm em Espanha, e como eles podem tirar proveito dessas situações para alcançar um maior nível de bem-estar?; Que chance tem integração na sociedade espanhola? Este estudo etnográfico, com base em pesquisa realizada em um Centro de Recepção Tenerife Menores Desacompanhados, concentra-se nas rotas de migração desses jovens, e analisar em que medida a educação e apoio que recebem na Espanha afeta sua subsequente emprego e integração social. Os resultados mostram que, embora o centro oferece bem-estar da juventude e oportunidades educacionais, a ambigüidade de suas situações jurídicas para atender a idade de políticas de migração dependentes da maioria, não fornece muito mais o seu desenvolvimento educacional e integração social neste contexto.

Palavras-chave: juventude; imigração; migração; educação intercultural

Introduction¹

A “new area of concern and focus” has unfolded with the growing migration of unaccompanied children in recent years (International Organization for Migration, 2011: 11). As the European countries attempt to regulate incoming migration flows, mediatized images of African migrants in overcrowded boats ‘illegally’ reaching Southern European shores have made their way around the world, but what has remained largely unnoticed is that since the late 1990’s, these boats have increasingly been carrying minors (Frontex, 2010). These youth under the age of eighteen, who are traveling without their families, are commonly referred to as *unaccompanied minors*.²

The Canary Islands have been one of the main points of irregular entry into Europe by sea from North and West Africa, and have received an exceptionally high percentage of unaccompanied minors in recent years (Frontex, 2010). In 2006, tens of thousands of African boat migrants, including nearly 1000 unaccompanied minors reached the Spanish Archipelago - located off the Northwest coast of the African mainland - and caused a migration ‘crisis’³ (in Lopez-Reillo, 2011:22). During this peak period of arrivals, Spain lacked the capacity to accommodate the incoming number of minors, who were received into improvised large-scale emergency centres that held hundreds of minors (HRW, 2007, 2010). By late 2010, as the situation stabilized and the influx decreased, the youth were allocated to smaller reception centres hosting no more than a dozen minors at a time. Although the number of boat migrants to the islands has drastically declined in the past five years, the proportion of incoming minors remains high. Of the 340 arrivals in 2011, nearly one quarter of migrants were minors (Spain, Ministry of Interior, 2012).

In line with human rights conventions at the European Union (EU) and international levels, including the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989 (CRC), Spain cannot easily repatriate a minor, and must respect the *best interest of the child*. Currently, Spain’s national legislation allows for unaccompanied minors to fall under the Spanish Protection System for Minors, which means that they are entitled to the same rights as national minors, while under the age of eighteen. In practice, unaccompanied minors tend to be placed in a specialized reception centre that not only covers their basic needs, but also provides access to education. In fact, Spain has been “cited as an example of best practice to be followed at a European level” in terms of its legal framework applying to unaccompanied minors, and particularly for its “legislation granting access to education” (PICUM, 2013:19). The youth migrating to Spain originate predominantly from countries where access to education is limited, such as Morocco and Senegal, where respectively 40% to 65% of the youth aged 15-19 received no education or have dropped out of school, according to the latest Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2012:26).

The 100 to 2000 km boat journey from the coasts of these countries to the Canary Islands is a perilous route for adults to undertake, but becomes even more alarming for children who are putting their lives at risk. What economic and socio-cultural factors push these youth to seek a better life whilst endangering their lives? What educational opportunities are available to them in Spain and how can these propel them into secure living situations? What can be said about their integration

¹The findings reported in this article were originally presented under the title “Deferred Dreams: Unaccompanied African Youths’ Educational Development Experience in the Canary Islands” at American Education Research Association, San Francisco, California, April 2013; and at the International Association

² The terms ‘minor’, ‘children’ and ‘youth’ are used almost interchangeably in this study. While unaccompanied minors are legally considered to be children under the age of eighteen, the term ‘youth’ is found to better represent their reality.

³ The inflow of boat migrants to Spain in 2006 surged to 39 180 persons, of which 80% were headed to the Canary Islands (Spain, Ministry of Interior, 2012).

prospects? And how is their identity affected by this major transition in their lives and are their dreams fulfilled?

This exploratory study⁴ with an ethnographic character analyses a growing category of young migrants caught in a legal conundrum; on the one hand considered as irregular economic migrants, and on the other, as children to be protected and educated. Little is known on the migration of unaccompanied children and how their lives unfold inside a reception centre, and thereafter, once they have exited it. Building on previous research and theories on minority youth's educational attainment and socio-economic integration, this article draws on qualitative fieldwork conducted in a reception centre in Tenerife, the Canary Islands, during 2012 and 2013. Based on participant-observation and on the youth's accounts, including those of former unaccompanied minors, the centre's staff's input as well as that of local practitioners, this study provides insight on the youths' experience in a centre and their access to educational opportunities, and discusses the barriers that shape their integration trajectories into European society.

Theoretical Considerations

Researching unaccompanied minors in the Canary Islands must take into consideration the dual tension of their integration into a new nation state, while at the same time experiencing a fragmented education. Because of the unique situation in which these youth find themselves, the theoretical lens with which they can be understood stems from research on youth and migrants; from studies of peers and their influences; from the classic studies of minority youth expressing oppositional behaviors; to the current theories of segmented assimilation. These interrelated fields of literature provide theoretical insights that conceptualize young migrants' dilemmas and educational development, to better understand their identity, motives, social interactions, motivation, integration trajectories and aspirations. This is done within the larger framework of the nation state, showing how such youth fare under Spain's multilingual education policies, and immigration policies.

To start with, the study of youth in the last few years has shifted away from the 'transitions model' that viewed youth as a phase in the progression from childhood to adulthood, and from a state of dependence to autonomy (in Jeffrey, 2009). Bucholtz's work on youth, which informs this study, positions young people not as incomplete adults but as actors in their own right, with their "own distinctive identities and practices" (2002: 532). Their current experiences, their "here-and-now" and shifting identities are considered to be key in the study of youth (Bucholtz & Skapoulli, 2009: 2).

Since the migration of unaccompanied minors is a relatively new phenomenon, the current literature on youth migration largely focuses on the 'Second Generation' - youth who were born or grew up in a 'host' country to which their parents migrated (as opposed to youth who migrated independently). Certain modern migration theorists however, have considered youth's unaccompanied migration as a family's economic strategy to contribute to the household's income through remittances (Stark & Bloom 1985; Lauby and Stark 1988). In recent years research reveals that migrants from the Global South generally do not originate from the poorest segments of society, but "from reasonably well-off backgrounds" (De Haas, 2008; 1308), or a lower middle-class

⁴This study combines the interdisciplinary perspectives of three authors: the first author completed the fieldwork, made the analysis and wrote the findings as part of a Masters' thesis in Sociology, bringing the migration studies perspective; the second directed the thesis and provided expertise and literature from the fields of anthropology and education from the US and Spanish context; and the third author based in the Canary Islands, negotiated entry, co-directed the thesis, and conducted follow up interviews. The joint efforts made it possible to produce this paper with an educational focus.

of people who have the means to migrate, and an awareness of the constraints they face in their own countries (De Haas, 2009). Within migration studies, Lee's push-pull model (1966) can also be useful to determine the forces that bring youth to migrate in this case. This theory takes into account the interplay of factors (i.e. climate, education system, political situation, employment, etc.) that attract individuals to - or repel them from - their place of origin, and their destination. Thus, individuals may feel 'pushed' out of their own location, and/or 'pulled' towards another location.

Once in the 'host' country, Gibson *et al.* (2004) show that for youth with an immigrant background, co-ethnic influences play a significant role. Especially their peers' influence can lead to positive or negative effects on their aspirations and educational attainment. In the case of minority youth in an educational context, creating a safe space that accommodates their identities has been deemed essential; otherwise youth may create their own space of belonging elsewhere and develop a resistance towards education (Gibson *et al.*, 2004). Peers also have the potential to be a source of social capital to each other, defined by Stanton-Salazar (2004) as relationships that give access to resources, and may facilitate their advancement process.

Similarly, Portes *et al.* (2010) further studied immigrant youth's educational advancement and status attainment specifically in Spain, using segmented assimilation theory. They found that high aspirations (that lead to higher chances of educational and subsequent success) were fomented by peers' influences and access to social capital. Portes and Zhou (1993)'s original segmented assimilation theory had found that second generation youth could be at-risk of taking a 'downward' route into the margins of society, depending on how favorable government policies and societal attitudes were towards them; and on how well established their co-ethnic community was in the host country. Without these supports, visible minority youth who find themselves in proximity to an underprivileged socio-economic context, could assimilate into that deprived sector of society by being highly influenced by their peers, and eventually adopting oppositional behaviors towards the mainstream. This theory contrasts with conventional assimilation models in which immigrants are expected to follow a 'straight-line' assimilation path and acculturation into the middleclass. Following a straight-line, a selective, or a downward assimilation route has repercussions on the youth's educational attainment as well as chances of upward mobility.

On a more structural level, Ogbu & Simons (1998) sustain that having a minority status within a society can act upon young people's aspirations and educational attainment. They advance that minorities' response towards education and institutions must be seen in the light of their structural and historical relations with the majority society. Depending on how a minority group was incorporated into society, they adopt a *positive* or *negative* dual status frame of reference. Thus, individuals of a minority view their integration within society both as culturally additive and beneficial, or as a subtractive process that threatens their identity, which leads to suspicion towards institutions. The latter frame of reference foments ambivalence or resistance towards schooling.

In terms of language adaptation, the literature has shown that there is a tendency in Spain to not have a specific commitment to linguistic diversity, despite the existing regional variations of Catalan, Basque, and Valenciano. Research shows that immigrants must adapt linguistically and tend to be viewed as a problem to be remedied rather than seeing their language as a right or a resource (Relaño Pastor, 2009). Newcomers who do not speak Spanish and arrive with a below average level of schooling require intense submersion in Spanish, and due to lack of resources, many of these programmes tend to foster a 'subtractive approach' to bilingualism, without parental reinforcement, or qualified teachers (Relaño Pasto & Mijares, 2011).

Previous empirical research on unaccompanied minors in Tenerife and Madrid has identified dissonances between the youth's situation in theory and practice. It was found that the educational programming of reception centres diverges from the youth's own migratory projects, which can

cause demotivation, resistance and frustrations (Godeneau et al, 2007; Gonzalez Perez & Martin-Palomino, 2008). These scholars noted the youth saw their stay at the centre as a waiting period rather than a formative one. Lopez-Reillo (2011) argued that the youth hit a ‘glass ceiling’ with regards to their educational attainment (reaching 9th grade at most), which resulted in a loss in human capital. According to her, the youth limit their own aspirations, due to the fact that their caretakers tend to see and treat them as primarily work-oriented, and on that basis, they lower their expectations for their educational achievement. She discussed a “great paradox” revolving around the fact that the minors are on the one hand pushed to integrate into Spanish society as much as possible, while on the other hand they are asked to not stray from who they are, in order to face the challenges that their immigration status brings once they turn eighteen. Lastly, it has been pointed out that the youth may conceptualize the centre as an extension of the ‘control and retention’ system that governs their presence in a foreign territory, which foment suspicion in the youth towards those who want to help them, and underlines the crucial importance of building trust with them within the centre setting (Gonzalez Arenas, 2000).

Methodology

The bulk of the data was collected inside one of the four small-scale reception centres of Tenerife, which is the Island in the archipelago that has hosted the largest percentage of unaccompanied minors (Lopez-Reillo, 2011). The centre itself housed 10 of the 44 unaccompanied minors present on the Island at the time of the research. Entry was negotiated and made possible thanks to an agreement between the non-governmental organization (NGO) that runs the centre and the University of La Laguna, which allows certain interns to have access to centres that are inaccessible to the public. Full access to this centre was exceptionally granted to the first researcher as an intern, for a three-month period for the purpose of this research.

The data was derived from the following groups of informants:

Table 1

Sample Composition

	Current Unaccompanied Minors	Former Unaccompanied Minors	Reception Centre’s Staff Members	Local Practitioners
Sample Occupation	10 Students/ Interns	6 2 Employed 2 Unemployed 1 Student	8 Director 2 Educators 4 Counselors Cook	5 Academic 2 Intercultural Mediators NGO Coordinator Government Representative
Origin	8 Arabs 2 Sub Saharans	4 Arabs 2 Sub Saharan	5 Spanish 2 Arabs 1 Sub Saharan	3 Spanish 2 Arabs
Age Range	15-17	18-22	N/A	N/A
Gender	Male	Male	6 Male 2 Female	3 Male 2 Female

* Six of the ten current unaccompanied minors were studied in-depth.

The ten *current* unaccompanied minors represented the entire sample of youth housed within the centre. Six of these were studied in-depth and constituted the focal point of the research. The four other minors were not present for the full research-period due to transfers to/from other centres and they were only studied through participant-observation. The six *former* unaccompanied minors who had left the centre after turning eighteen represented a parallel group that provided a picture of unaccompanied minors' potential lives after they leave the centre. These youth were found by snowball sampling, with the help of contacts at the centre. The eight staff members also represented the entire sample of personnel working at the centre. And finally, the five local practitioners, each directly involved with unaccompanied minors in Tenerife in different capacities, were approached to provide their insights and to broaden the study's perspective on the issue.

This study distinguishes itself methodologically, by its inclusion of the full sample and range of youth within a centre, and its intensive period of getting to know them. Previous research on unaccompanied minors in Tenerife had largely been based on one-time interviews of self-selected youth, and often done through translators (see e.g., Godeneau et al. 2007; Gonzalez Pérez & Martin-Palomino, 2008; HRW, 2007; López-Reillo, 2011). Following Bucholtz' recommendation to study youth and mobility "locally and ethnographically" (2009:2), participant-observation was chosen as the main data-collection method for this study. Over three months, nearly 280 hours were spent doing participant-observation and shadowing the minors, in order to informally gain an emic perspective of their experiences. In addition, in-depth interviews in Spanish were conducted with the three sample groups. The 25 interviews were semi-structured, as described by Kvale (2011), to allow for more flexibility. The content of the youth's individual files at the centre was also analyzed, including their Individual Educative Projects⁵, which gave an overview of the educational objectives set forth by the centre for each youth, and their progress. Lastly, social media content and photos from 18 online accounts of current and former minors were explored to gain an insight of their social identities, peers and social networks.

In terms of ethical considerations, the research was conducted under the umbrella of the University of La Laguna's faculty of Education agreement with the centre. The NGO's coordination office and director of the centre approved of the study and granted access to these youth with the understanding that the ethical requirements of the University were to be used, and that the third author would act as internship supervisor. The informants in this study were aware of the researcher's role and consented to participate and have their interviews recorded. Moreover, the youth's names were changed and pseudonyms were used in order to maintain confidentiality, without links being made to their identification.

In order to build trust with the minors, the researcher was mindful to avoid being in a position of authority within the centre. As an intern, it was feasible to walk the fine line between the role of staff and pupil. As a white, middleclass, young Canadian woman (and Spanish speaking), the researcher took care to spend several weeks 'hanging out' with the group and each minor, using common traits (such as being young and foreign) with which they related. The researcher ensured that the in-depth interviews were conducted in a neutral space outside of the centre. The researcher was satisfied with the level of trust established by the time the interviews took place, based on friend-like relationships developed with each minor within the centre, and their eventual willingness to share personal stories one-on-one with her. Translators were not used during the interviews - conducted in Spanish - to not risk breaching that trust (even if this meant potentially losing data due to the language barrier that arose from Spanish not being the youth's or the researcher's native tongue).

⁵ From the Spanish « Proyecto Educativo Individual »

The data was analyzed using Glaser and Strauss (1967)'s grounded theory method of open coding, detecting categories, and comparing them across different data sources to identify emerging themes and reach triangulation of these, as described in Ryan & Bernard (2003).

The themes that arose from the key findings were organized into a matrix that was divided into four broad phases of their trajectory. The first addresses the youth's origins and motives for migrating, and the second looks at how being put under the Spanish protection system affects their identity. The third theme focuses on the youth's educational experience in Spain, and the fourth attempts to draw a picture of the youth's socio-economic integration once they leave the centre.

Origins & Motives: Chasing a Dream?

The professionals who worked with the youth in this study saw them as pertaining to two broad categories: on the one hand the 'street kids' or 'adventurers' lacking a familial structure, an education and a general adherence to social norms; while on the other hand, there were those who came from a stable but impoverished background, and whose aim was to find steady employment in order to provide for their families. Although this may have been the case for some, the youth in this study formed a rather heterogeneous group. They represented a diversity of backgrounds, varying levels of literacy and education, varied family structures, and uneven levels of socio-economic status. Their motives regarding their migratory plans were not so evident. For the most part, the youth had chosen to undertake the journey themselves, without the consent of their parents, and poverty did not surface as the most relevant factor in their decision to migrate.

Overall, the youth's act of migration appeared to be the result of a 'general inertia' as the Director of the centre called it, caused by years of out-migration from their countries of origin. Many of them did not seem concerned about their family's financial standing, but rather talked about the potential gains that they had perceived to be easily accessible in Europe. They grew up in an increasingly globalized world that projects an idealized image of Europe, not only through mass media, but also through their own connections with migrants and peers who shared information of Europe through word of mouth, social media, or the display of wealth upon their return. Far from being the first in their families to migrate, over half of the youth in this study had a first-degree relative in the Canary Islands, and all of them had at least one second-degree relative in Europe. With these kinship and social networks established abroad, combined with the perceived abundance of opportunities in Europe, most of the youth gave the impression of having boarded the boat not so much with the idea of providing for their families, but rather with the desire to have access to a different *lifestyle*, or opportunities, that they imagined for themselves in Europe. Fouad, a former minor from Morocco explained:

Well, I got the idea from some friends who were studying with me, back in Morocco. They had come here and they put the idea in my head, and I came without... without asking my parents. They told me: "Its up to you. Its dangerous" and all those things. But I closed my eyes and...

While some knew ahead of time that they would most likely stay in a reception centre for a couple of years upon arrival, all of them expressed the intention of eventually entering the workforce in Spain or in another European country. Out of the 16 youth, with the exception of one, it was clear from their responses they had not moved to Spain primarily for its educational opportunities.

Reshaping their Identity to Integrate the Protection System for Minors

Several local practitioners explained that during the risky boat journey to Spain it was common practice for migrants to destroy any identification documents that could help officials identify where they came from and facilitate their repatriation. Therefore, in order to be incorporated into the Protection System for Minors once on Spanish soil, the undocumented youth needed to be attributed a 'new' identity (i.e. a date of birth, an age⁶, in some cases a new name, and a new legal status). Such information was needed not only for practical reasons, but in order to process the paperwork that could potentially enable the youth to stay in Spain after the age of eighteen. Applying for a residence permit while they were in the centre was a crucial step, because this document would enable them, once they found employment, to apply for a work permit. Having both a residence and a work permit were basic requirements to legally stay in Spain and sustain themselves once they left the centre at the age of eighteen. The possibility of applying for asylum was never once mentioned as a potential option for these youth.

In their concrete dealings with the intricate immigration policies and administration system in Spain, there surfaced a discrepancy between their right for protection as minors (to legitimately stay on the territory) and their undocumented situation. In order to process temporary residence permit, as the system required the youth needed to provide official identification documents. Being mindful to protect themselves from the risk of deportation⁷, the youth tended to provide false passports from their countries of origin for the paperwork. In turn, this false information replaced the previous information and became part of the identity that they learned to grow into, accepting what this meant legally and socially as 'truths'. The centre's staff expressed their suspicion and uncertainty surrounding the youths' personal data, and the youth were reluctant to give details about their past or their families that could be revealing of their place of origin. Many of the youth had lived in other reception centres prior to this one, which added layers of complexity to their journeys, and accentuated the transitory nature of their stay. The fact that the youth felt the need to live an ever-ambiguous life in order to protect themselves - and at the same time, to adjust the system to their needs - underscored the real-time effects that their migration status had on them. By being connected to immigration policies, the centre and the system hosting the youth was not conducive to creating the 'safe-space' that would accommodate the youth's 'real' identity, and would ideally foster their sense of belonging and lead them to acknowledge the usefulness of education in Spain as a vehicle for their future.

Educational Development & Motivation

The youth's educational development was encouraged through a range of opportunities available through the centre. The youth under the age of 16 attended Public School along with local Canarian peers, while those over the age of 16 were generally registered in vocational programmes. These programmes taught technical skills aimed at the labor market, such as: waitering, cooking, carpentry, electricity, administration, gardening, construction, IT, etc. In addition, two intercultural

⁶ Their age is determined with an x-ray of their wrist (with a margin of error of two to four years). In accordance with the best interest of the child, they are meant to be given the lowest possible age of that range.

⁷ Although this was not done in practice, the EU Return Directive of 2008, allows EU member states to repatriate unaccompanied minors, as long as the *best interest of the child* is considered, and that the child is sent back to their families or guardian, in a safe environment.

mediators, whose role is to provide cultural mediation and support in education, gave occasional individual or group tutoring evening sessions at the centre, focusing on literacy skills and immigration paperwork. Intercultural mediators play a significant role in schools and act as liaisons between the community and the centre.

One of the intercultural mediators stressed that the centre was aiming for the youth's holistic development, as opposed to just addressing their basic needs. This reflected the NGO's mandate to "work with the minors to build their personality in a comprehensive manner" (MCAPAZ, 2012). The centre drafted an Educational Project to guide its programme delivery. In this document, the centre's philosophy in working with the youth was outlined; guidelines regarding educational and integration goals were spelled out; as well as the centre's rules, the youth's duties, and behavioral benchmarks. The pedagogy outlined in this document was transferred by the two educators into each minor's Individual Educational Project, a document detailing each minor's social and educational objectives, and means to reach them, including one-on-one tutoring or chats, role plays, school attendance records, etc. External services were also available to the youth, such as occasional mental health support, and workshops leading to labor market insertion. Although the centre's staff was well educated, well-meaning and culturally diverse, few of them had credentials in child pedagogy. Their salaries, just above minimum wage and often paid out late, depended on a government funding agreement, renewed yearly. Although they were not obligated to obtain and renew residence permits for the youth by the State, the staff did so, taking extra steps to regularize their immigration status.

The Youth's Response to Education

The youth inside the centre appeared to overwhelmingly lack interest in their own educational development. They were dismissive of the tutors and educators, and did not proactively take advantage of the educational opportunities that were provided. Their poor school attendance records were a clear indicator of their general demotivation. The educators explained that Halil and Hassan generally went to class two hours late; Omar systematically skipped one day of class per week feigning to be sick; Karim usually skipped school altogether and roamed the streets instead; and Moussa paid so little attention in class that he was eventually expelled. Only Adama attended his classes consistently and aimed for perfect scores, yet he had been the only one who had reached a high school level in his country of origin. The individualized evening classes provided inside the centre by the intercultural mediators were scarcely attended and even avoided. Those who were coaxed to participate in a lesson fiddled with their phones or leaned on the table, visibly waiting it out instead of fully engaging. Most of the youth were registered in a vocational programme based on their interests and skills, but the director claimed they typically had no preference when they were asked what they wanted to learn. Of the 12 youth interviewed, including former minors, only two had clear educational ambitions.

Several factors surfaced to explain the youth's general lack of motivation for schooling. The first has to do with the limited capacity of educational and social structures in their countries of origin, as experienced by the youth. In fact, most of them had not been accustomed to attend school on a regular basis in their countries of origin and did not develop the corresponding work ethic. Some had dropped out of school or not attended at all. Nearly all of the youth interviewed spoke of menial jobs they had held in their home countries as children, such as selling things in the streets, agricultural work, sewing, fishing, etc. Only a few had been assiduous students in their home countries, but had interrupted their studies in order to migrate. Halil and Omar admitted that although they had been enrolled in school back home, 'going to school' for them meant spending the day just outside of the school building, playing sports or hanging out instead of attending classes. In theory, Omar had received eight years of schooling in Morocco, but he still had difficulty spelling

his own name in his native language when he reached Spain. Hassan on his part was completely illiterate before he entered the centre. And while Moussa and Karim mentioned liking going to school back home, their accounts of their childhood suggested that they had not attended consistently. Of the six youth in the centre, only Adama, who had been in high school in his country, had not worked in his childhood, and would have continued his studies in Dakar had it not been for a prolonged teachers' strike.

Two of the youth also pointed out that in their countries of origin, formal education and credentials were not necessarily needed in order to find work, or even to start a business. Relating education to employment and upward mobility may have been somewhat of a new concept for the youth, who did not automatically make the connection or have a model for understanding this.

Making education mandatory for the youth while at the centre kept them away from the workforce that most had already incorporated in their own country, and rather than representing an opportunity, it represented an unwelcome obligation for some. Hassan for example, who greatly valued his freedom and autonomy, maintained that school was for little children. And Halil, who was very curious and keen to learn new things in general, viewed formal education in Spain as something that he was being subjected to against his will. He was convinced that there was nothing for him to learn in Spain. Many saw their stay at the centre primarily as a way of obtaining the 'papers'⁸ that would allow them to stay and to work in Spain or elsewhere. Instead of focusing on their educational advancement, the youth tended to adopt a carefree attitude. An educator worried that the youth used the centre as if it were a hotel, where everything was provided for them, and their responses were minimal. Former unaccompanied minors also recalled that they had felt equally demotivated during their stay at the centre, as Yassine, a former minor from Morocco, explained:

When I was in the centre I remember that people came to give us classes, and I remember that I wasn't motivated back then. I wasn't even motivated enough to listen to them or to see what they had come for. It doesn't matter to you at that moment, because you already have everything. There's nothing to fight for, because you already have everything. The day that you leave the centre, you realize what you had in the centre – that the centre is necessary where it is.

An intercultural mediator stressed that these youth needed individual guidance and a learning environment adapted each to their own level, precisely because they were learning new things in a new cultural and linguistic environment. Especially for those who lacked basic literacy skills even in their own language, being expected to take on an education in Spain represented an enormous challenge. Many had not previously developed the cognitive aptitudes that come with schooling and facilitate the processing of such new knowledge. The intercultural mediator insisted that for a 'street kid' like Hassan who grew up in a nomadic culture, sitting still for 30 minutes and paying attention to a teacher represented significant progress. This point is of tremendous importance when assessing these youth's motivation level in general terms. While their observed behavior appeared to be a flagrant lack of motivation in 'Western' terms, it may in fact have represented substantial efforts and a step up from the youth's own point of view, based on the type of background they had. On the other hand, for a youth like Adama, who attended a French Lycée in Senegal, his training to become a cook in Spain represented a step down, since he had considered going on to university.

Adapted Programming: Finding a Balance

Some youth gained a certain degree of motivation in their educational development through practical learning, when they partook in an unpaid internship in their field of study. Halil and Omar

⁸ Residence and work permits were generally referred to as "papers" (from the Spanish term *papeles*).

suddenly started waking up extra early in order to be ‘at work’ on time, did extra hours, and talked about their day with pride when they returned home in their work uniform, completely exhausted, but with eyes glowing.

The centre’s youth over the age of 16 were generally registered into vocational programmes that were *adapted* to students with special needs⁹. This placed immigrant youth alongside local special needs students who had a lower than average performance, including students with intellectual disabilities. From the youth’s accounts, their local peers scarcely attended class, which led several of them to perceive Spanish people as “lazy”. These programmes may have been well intentionally adapted, but the question is, adapted to whom? Not necessarily to their situation of *foreignness*, which implied linguistic, cultural and educational barriers, but rather to that of local youth with other learning impediments that prevented them from attending the ‘regular’ tracks. For the unaccompanied minors who had arrived in Spain after the age of 16 and had not attended public school in Spain, their interaction with local youth through vocational programmes remained very limited in both quantity and quality. Their interactions with local peers did not appear to foment high aspirations, or act as a source of social capital.

In terms of language, the youth’s level of Spanish was generally enough to communicate orally, but was basic or non-existent in terms of reading and writing. They had mostly learned their Spanish language skills through daily informal interactions with staff members, teachers and certain peers. Acquiring a good level of Spanish was necessary for educational advancement, and eventually to find work. While these youth brought a variety of languages from their countries of origin, without an explicit commitment to language diversity in Spain, their languages and cultural backgrounds did not seem to be considered an asset for their environment. The youth experienced somewhat of a ‘sink or swim’ way of learning of Spanish. They gained language skills in the centre from tutoring to some extent, but acquired most of their skills informally, through their partial immersion in the new cultural context.

Peer Influences, Resistance and Fostering Dialogue

Some of the youth were very much aware of their own lack of dedication towards their educational development, as Moussa stated with guilt in his eyes: “Yes. Yes, the centre gives me a lot. The thing is, I don’t pay attention to it.” The fact that most youth were conscious that they could be doing better suggests that these youth might have taken a different approach regarding their education under different circumstances. The question is, what circumstances? Peer influences had a large role to play in the attitude taken by the youth towards the centre and its opportunities. Staff members spoke of those who were ‘too integrated’ and those who were not enough. Moussa for example, who had arrived as a young boy was ‘so integrated’ that he took a carefree attitude, choosing to disregard his undocumented status and spending all his time with local friends, surfing and camping. Halil, who had arrived over the age of 16 and had little contact with locals, preferred to stick to his own culture through co-ethnic peers. He often complained of being in the centre and remained suspicious of Spanish society and its institutions. In both cases the youth paid little attention to their educational development, and preferred to adopt a day-by-day philosophy, most likely accentuated by the uncertainty of their legitimacy to stay in Spain in the long run.

The fact that the centre exclusively housed foreign youth limited their contact with society and biased their impression of it. An intercultural mediator explained that separating the youth from society and having them exist in a “mini-ghetto” had the effect of labeling them pejoratively as

⁹ This refers to the Adapted Professional Qualification Programme (*Programa de Cualificación Profesional Adaptado*, or PCPA), as opposed to the ‘regular’ track, the Initial Professional Qualification Programme (*Programa de Cualificación Profesional Inicial*, or PCPI).

“youth from the centre” in the eyes of locals. From the youths’ and staff’s comments, it appeared that “Moors”¹⁰ were especially considered troublesome by society, while Sub-Saharan Africans, although more easily identifiable, were considered more adaptable and easy going. Interestingly, a significant part of the youth’s contact with local peers, and consequently with society, was done through online social media - a virtual space where they could project their identity as they saw fit. After curfew hours inside the centre, the youth were often found chatting online with peers or girlfriends. Considering their limited abilities in Spanish, their online communications often took the form of posting photos of themselves or things of interest, and making short, trivial comments on each other’s accounts. By posting photos of themselves in front of fancy cars, or other things that were not theirs, ironically they perpetrated the myth of Europe as a place of easy gains. Certain youth who were more mature chose to distance themselves both from certain peers and social media, which reduced their peers’ influence and empowered them to make their own plans and follow them.

The youth’s interaction with staff members was generally positive and friendly, although at times it quickly became hostile, and in some cases aggressive. All the youth admitted that they trusted staff members only selectively, and tended to choose one or two of them as their allies. The educators at the centre had the delicate dual role of regulating the youth’s movements and behaviors (applying curfews and rules), while being in charge of creating a home for them, and fostering their integration and educational development. An educator reported that the youth were purposefully alienating themselves from the centre and the opportunities it offered. So much so that the youth’s resistance to schooling, rules and chores was compared to that of a warring party against the centre’s educators. To him, the youth were like an army turning around and fighting against itself, instead of joining forces with the educators and fighting together against the challenges ahead, such as drugs, racism, finding employment, housing, staying connected with their families, etc.

Such situations pointed towards the youth’s significant degree of suspicion and resistance towards the system, but also reflected a certain inexperience in Spain on the educational problematic of hosting migrant youth. This was notable through the lack of established strategies and research to provide examples of good practice to foster dialogue, teach life skills, and address the needs and barriers of these youth and their particular situation.

Socio-Economic Integration and Future Trajectories

Staff members expressed ambivalence regarding the youth’s potential for successful integration into Spanish society. From their perspective, finding employment was practically synonymous with integration. The staff’s assessment was based on their continuing contact with former minors who had left the centre, as well as the shrinking employment opportunities in a country where the media relentlessly repeated that “5 million people are out of work”¹¹. The director identified three common paths for the youth’s future: a) those who moved on to another European country, b) those who left the centre with papers and employment, usually arranged through internships while at the centre, and c) those who did not secure employment or papers and became subject to deportation.

¹⁰ From *Moros* in Spanish, used to refer to Arabs, and more specifically Moroccan Berbers.

¹¹ This figure refers to the active labour force. The unemployment rate in Spain was the highest in the EU at 23.6% at the time of this study, and almost reaching 50% for the young adult population under the age of 25 (Eurostat, 2012).

Testimonies from six former minors who had previously been housed in the reception centre were gathered in order to put a face on these potential trajectories. Some of these youth were doing relatively well, while others were struggling. The single most important thing for the former minors was finding employment. But in order to work in Spain, both a residence and a work permit are needed. Concretely, this meant the youth needed to find an employer willing to offer them a one-year, full-time contract in order to fulfill administrative requirements, and complete the paperwork to obtain a work permit, and to renew their residence permit for a longer period of time. Considering the youth's linguistic, educational and cultural barriers, in the midst of the economic crisis in Spain, this represented a considerable challenge, as Yassine pointed out: "The necessary thing is to have a job. If you don't have a job, a work permit... If you don't have work, you won't have papers. And without papers, you're not worth anything here."

Of the six interviewed, two had papers and stable employment (a waiter and a printmaker); one was waiting for a scholarship to continue his studies; while the other three were unemployed and without income. Two of the last group were relying on co-ethnic friends and living in precarious situations. The six youth's residence permits had expiry dates ranging from a few months to up to two years, and one of the unemployed youth had become undocumented.¹² This youth was arrested during the course of this research, and would most likely have been deported, had it not been for the director of the centre's intervention. The youth with employment and papers felt at ease in Spanish society, while the unemployed tended to express bitterness. Still, the director maintained that the majority of the youth eventually integrated economically and socially in Spain or in continental Europe. But while the youth found ways to navigate in the host society, they did not express having developed strong feelings of belonging in Spain.

Support & Networks

Although the former minors had not felt so fond of the centre while inside it, once they had exited, they unanimously recognized the support they had received, and regarded their stay as a positive experience. The centre remained an important source of moral and legal support for the majority of them. They called or returned to the centre to visit friends left behind, to receive help with paperwork, or information on potential jobs, to ask for medicine, get a ride or have a meal. As the director of the centre pointed out, any follow up with the youth after they had left was done strictly on a personal basis by the staff, out of goodwill, since it was not part of the centre's official functions.

While this was not an option for most, certain youth were lucky enough to secure a spot in a centre for youth over the age of eighteen, run by a different NGO, where spaces and funding were even more limited. Other than that, the youth relied mostly on co-ethnic friends, and in particular those who they had known inside the centre. The youth's social networks, composed of mostly former unaccompanied minors, co-ethnics peers, family members, and some locals, were central to the youth's lives outside of the centre, especially for those who found themselves in difficult situations. Nevertheless, due to their similar minority status and economic constraints, the youth's contacts, with the exception of locals, formed a rather weak support network. By learning survival strategies from their co-ethnic peers, the youth could easily be led to partake in the informal economy. The government representative interviewed expressed that that "as of now, [the youth] face a complicated situation" in terms of securing papers, employment, housing, etc. "They are left defenseless".

¹² Upon departure from the centre, their residence permits were usually still valid for up to one year. Unless the permit is renewed (usually by finding employment), holders of expired permits are residing in Spain illegally and are said to be 'undocumented'.

Unrealistic Dreams?

The youth in this study had initially come to Spain with the impression that they could easily make a fortune, yet they found themselves having to lower or deferring their expectations once they settled in. Although their future trajectories were uncertain, the youth's confidence in attaining their dream jobs was shaky at best, as Halil, a minor from Morocco put it:

I don't have a dream job, I can do whichever job. In reality I want to be an electric engineer, yes, yes. We... You know that none of us... I think that no one can have one hundred percent what he wants. But if I get a job, whatever it is, I'll work.

Others like Halil showed reluctance to dream further. Karim had wanted to be a pilot when he was younger, but would now work in anything. Omar's greatest aspiration was to work in an office. Adama admitted that before being at the centre he had no intention of becoming a cook. Hassan said he would like to work in carpentry, but he seemed to think that selling drugs was a more viable option. Only Moussa maintained his initial dream of becoming a professional soccer player, but seemed unsure that he could pull this off. The two former minors who were employed seemed content with their work, although one of them admitted that he had never dreamt of being a waiter. With hindsight, the other confessed that he should not have interrupted his technical studies in Morocco. The three who had been unemployed for a long time would have been more than delighted to take on any menial job. And lastly, the former minor who had chosen to continue his studies wanted to become a nurse, but this dream hinged on his receiving a scholarship that would enable him to continue.

In the short to medium term, all but one of the 12 youth interviewed were contemplating migrating to another European country within the next few months or years, where they were convinced they could find better, using the help of their social or kinship networks to do so. In the long-term however, they imagined themselves settling comfortably back in their country of origin, after having worked in Spain or Europe for several years and earned enough money. But in the present reality, many felt stuck in a situation where they could not stay in Spain especially during the current economic crisis, but felt they could not go back home 'early' or empty-handed.

Conclusion

In a context where European countries are growing increasingly restrictive towards immigration to their countries, and where the media regularly projects dramatic images of African migrants reaching their shores, this study found that the unaccompanied minors who make up an important percentage of the boats headed to the Canary Islands, were not escaping poverty per se, but rather being 'pulled' by the idealized image they have of Europe, perpetuated by their peers, and by their networks established abroad.

Once in Spain a discrepancy between Spain's obligation to provide minors with protection and the youth's undocumented status surfaced. While Spain's protection system for minors offered unaccompanied foreign minors the legislative advantage of receiving the same benefits that are available to national minors, the youth in this study remained suspicious of the Spanish government's power to repatriate them. In order to avoid deportation, the youth felt they had to hide their real identity and learn to navigate the dual standard of the system, leading them to reshape their identity. In addition to being immersed into a different cultural context, this ongoing process was not conducive to creating a 'safe space' that encouraged the development of a strong sense of belonging or lead them to want to take part in their educational development in Spain.

Even though the youth had access to a range of educational opportunities and social support through the centre that hosted them, most of them did not take full advantage of the available resources. In addition to their suspicion, most youth were ambivalent towards formal schooling and a lack of educational models or practices carried over from their home countries. Although the youth who had left the centre would recognize its value with hindsight, it can be said that the centre was only partially successful in instilling in them an educational model, or preparing them adequately for the challenges that lay ahead. The limited funding and the transitional nature of the centre came up time and again as one of its limitations, and remained central in the staff's intervention. Better-tailored programmes were needed to address the youth's linguistic, cultural and educational barriers, to bring them up to par with their local peers, and to promote long term planning and encourage the youth to attain higher aspirations. As it was, the youth who had been part of the workforce in their home countries at a young age did not fully understand the usefulness of staying within a centre or the need to study. Especially the ones who felt they had been 'forcefully incorporated' into the centre and obligated to study, developed a negative 'dual status frame of reference', which lead them to resist institutions and education. Others, who did not necessarily become adversarial, still tended to see the centre as a hotel, or a 'waiting period'. The one youth who showed an interest in studying, also stood out because of the positive study ethic he had developed in his home country. Moreover, he did not see his stay as 'forced', since he had willingly turned himself in to the Spanish authorities. This youth also chose to distance himself from the influence of his peers, who tended to foment an atmosphere of suspicion and resistance in the centre. By taking a 'selective' approach towards assimilation and choosing to spend time with staff and those who promoted his advancement, this youth was able to focus on his goals. In a sense he was hitting a 'glass ceiling' however, since he aspired to go to university, and was instead learning to become a cook. And furthering his advancement by finding peers who could be a source of 'social capital' was found to be unlikely, considering that the youth had only limited contact with local peers, and a narrow impression of society.

Once they left the centre, the youth's main source of support revolved around the centre's staff, and co-ethnic peers who often found themselves in equally precarious situations. This weak support network was not conducive to upward mobility, and rather put the youth in a situation where they became vulnerable to taking a 'downward route' into the margins of society. The governmental policies that would allow them to legitimately reside, work and successfully integrate in Spain, were not realistic in a context of economic crisis where foreign youth faced additional barriers to finding employment. The youth who were lucky enough to find employment through internships at the centre were faring quite well, while the ones who were unemployed felt stuck in a situation where they could neither have high aspirations, nor go back to where they came from empty-handed, after risking their lives for this opportunity.

The lack of formal follow up or safety net for the youth once they had left the centre was indicative of the disconnect between the youth's needs and long-term integration, and the restrictive immigration policies that apply to them. The centre may have provided the youth with a window of opportunity be in Spain and gain an education, but as long as their legal situation remains uncertain once they leave the centre and that migration policies are unclear about a realistic pathway towards citizenship, the usefulness of their stay at the centre and need to become educated remains questionable. At stake is not just the fulfillment of the youths' dreams, but without the sense of belonging that comes with the legitimacy to stay in Spain, their ability to lead a stable and productive life in Europe becomes compromised.

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