

The counter-narrative of an ‘unaccompanied minor’-young offender in Spain: Lessons to be learnt for policies and practice

David Herrera-Pastor, Associate professor | Theory and History of Education, University of Málaga | Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Campus de Teatinos, 29071, Málaga (Spain) | d.herrera@uma.es (Corresponding author).

Cristina Redondo-Castro, Lecturer & Researcher | Theory and History of Education, University of Málaga | Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Campus de Teatinos, 29071, Málaga (Spain) | cristinaredondo@uma.es.

Marcos A. Payá-Gómez, Lecturer & Researcher | Didactics and School Organisation, University of Málaga | Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Campus de Teatinos, 29071, Málaga (Spain) | mpaya@uma.es.

Lorena Molina-Cuesta, Lecturer & Researcher | Theory and History of Education, University of Málaga | Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Campus de Teatinos, 29071, Málaga (Spain) | lorenacuesta@uma.es.

Summary

Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UFM) are often framed as criminals, rather than as at-risk children. This paper analyses the case of Ibrahim, a Moroccan boy who had both identities (migrant and offender), but whose case ended positively, in order to dismantle prejudices, show underlying inequalities, and learn from a good practice.

The research was carried out using a biographical research methodology, using the cross-narrative model. The main sources of information and data collection techniques were: a) Interviews with and 12 key informants; b) Documentary record (all files related to his case); and c) More than 200 photographs, mostly of his rehabilitation process.

The results are divided into two parts. The first one shows the (risk factors) living conditions of the unaccompanied minors in their contexts of origin. And the second one analyses the most relevant aspects of the successful intervention carried out with him.

The conclusions are drawn from their analysis: Firstly, an approach is recommended that is focused on humanising ‘UFM’ and ensuring a basic standard of living conditions, which would also reduce migration and anti-social behaviour. Secondly, a social, personalised, ecological and empowering model of intervention must be applied to support individuals transforming their circumstances.

Key words: Unaccompanied minor, Young offender, Practice, Policy, Narrative inquiry.

Introduction

This paper analyses the extraordinary story of Ibrahim, an ‘unaccompanied foreign minor’ (UFM) and ‘young offender’ whose life took a radical turn. After facing harsh economic circumstances during his childhood, Ibrahim left his home country of Morocco alone when he was sixteen, and joined a drug trafficking gang operating in the Strait of Gibraltar (one of the most common crossing points between Africa and Europe) with the hope of improving his living conditions. Some months later he was arrested in Spain, where he was irregularly, and sentenced to a two-year rehabilitation process.

As the process was being finalised, while he was on probation, he started working in a care home for protected minors, and subsequently developed a career in this field.

This is a success story, as his life was completely turned around. After being an ‘UFM’ and ‘young offender’, he became a contributing, independent member of society. This paper contains a critical review of Ibrahim’s story and the factors that contributed to its positive outcome.

This counter-narrative provides important insights into the situation in which these young people often find themselves. It also sheds some light on how current systems and underlying values should change in order to specifically benefit both these children and society as a whole, particularly in the context of the hostile attitudes towards young migrants encountered in some countries (Clemens *et al.*, 2019).

The paper first introduces an interpretation framework of the study’s basic concepts. Information on the methodological approach is then provided, followed by a selection of narrative quotes to present Ibrahim’s life story. The key findings from his story are analysed, and the conclusions contain some lessons that should be learnt for policy and practice.

Theoretical framework

This section is divided into two parts: the first one contains a description of the two identities/status that were assigned to Ibrahim and which mediated how his life story unfolded when he arrived in Spain, including an analysis of the relationship between the two. The second discusses some of the leading causes that lead minors to migrate.

An ‘UFM’ and ‘Young offender’: risk factors and myths

When he was arrested by the police in Spain, Ibrahim was assigned two identities/status (Simmons, 2021): ‘UFM’ and ‘Young offender’. Although both labels are often reductionist and will be questioned in this paper, they will be used here. The reason is that they framed Ibrahim’s story in terms of the legal and welfare practices and policies employed. While these labels failed to capture his overall identity, they marked a significant intersectional position (Waitoller *et al.*, 2019; Konstantoni *et al.*, 2017) that shaped the path he was able to take. However, other more comprehensive labels will be also used that more adequately represent the situation encountered by these young people. Each of these categories is briefly described below, and then the relationship between them will be examined.

In Europe's southern border in the 1990s, there was an ever-increasing migratory flow of minors who travelled independently without any family members. This phenomenon began to be questioned in the main host countries and by international organisations and institutions, as it was regarded as a risk situation. These young people were identified as ‘Unaccompanied Foreign Minors’ (UFM).

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, General Comment no. 6 (2005, 5), defines ‘unaccompanied minors’ as ‘children [...] who have been separated from both parents and other relatives and are not being cared for by an adult who, by law or custom, is responsible

for doing so'. In Spain, the 'Immigration Law' (Royal Decree 557/2011, Article 189), specifically defines an 'UFM' as:

'a foreign person under 18 who arrives in Spain without being accompanied by a responsible adult, either by law or custom, and is regarded as being at risk of being unprotected (provided that no responsible adult has effectively taken care of the minor), and any foreign minor is in this situation in Spain'.

Senovilla (2008, p. 21) holds that 'UFM' are children who migrate without being 'accompanied by their parents or guardians or by any other member of their family who may be responsible for their care'. Spain is one of the European countries that has received the largest number of unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents in recent decades (UNICEF, 2017), and the figures continue to grow.

'UNICEF (2010, 40) found that between 1993 and 2007, 49,485 unaccompanied children entered the Spanish care system, which implies an annual average of 3,299 children. These children are predominantly male, aged between 14 and 18 and Morocco is the main country of origin (Quiroga, Segura and Soria 2011). By 2008, Moroccan children accounted for 67 per cent of the total population of unaccompanied children (Spanish Ministry of Employment and Immigration quoted in UNICEF 2010: 45)' (Barbulescu & Grugel, 2016, p, 256).

According to data from Save the Children, in 2018 Spain recorded 6991 new arrivals of migrant minors with no accompanying family, although experts claim that these figures should be considered to be only indicative. Despite the fact that this is an European problem that has existed for several decades, there is a lack of an overall policy for receiving and dealing with this group, so there are major disparities in the social, legal and administrative treatment of these young people in different EU countries (Keles *et al.*, 2016; Ocáriz & Bermejo, 2008). In Spain, the criminal jurisdiction of those labelled as 'Young Offenders' is entirely governed by the Criminal Code (CC), which contains the core provisions concerning criminal law. Behaviour can only be regarded as criminal if it is provided for in the CC. This includes for minors. However, since the legal process is specific rather than ordinary in nature, a specific law was established to govern this special group (Law 5/2000 and Law 8/2006, regulating the Criminal Responsibility of Minors).

These specific regulations cover a number of areas that only apply to individuals aged between 14 and 18, given that adolescence is a special developmental stage. They are therefore within the scope of a special jurisdiction. This is intended to enable them to learn from their mistakes and construct a life within the law. A list of orders exists that make up the range of sanctions that can apply only to minors. The fact that minors are not treated and sanctioned in accordance with the CC does not mean they are not criminally responsible for their acts.

The links between these two categories are not always clear and have not been explored in depth to date. Further research is required to analyse the different aspects that come into play around them. It is necessary to urge the relevant institutions and specialist bodies to rigorously and comprehensively explore all elements involved, and to implement the policies and practices in the best possible manner. It is also essential to engage in social work to ensure that these labels and their connotations no longer obscure people's perception of these children (Martínez-Reguera, 2007) and that they understand the circumstances in which unaccompanied minors find themselves.

Many of the causes that lead unaccompanied children to migrate can result in them being at-risk. Risk factors are those elements whose influence may generate problematic conducts or conflicts that impede the proper development of the individual (Hein, 2004).

Immigration is not related to crime levels. In principle, it has not been proven that there is ‘a greater likelihood of criminal activity among foreign minors compared to their national counterparts’ (Herrero, 2009, p. 167). A different matter altogether would be to consider the characteristics of the situation in which migrant minors find themselves. The circumstances these children face in settling down and moving forward in their new environment are wide-ranging and often very difficult. As Urrea argued (2004, p. 28), ‘we need to concern ourselves with minors who are at social risk, but not only because they could become a social risk’.

Unaccompanied children on the move are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and to becoming the victims of crime, especially when their immigration status is uncertain, and they are unsure about their situation. Moreover, they have become increasingly criminalised through this very status (Rinken, 2016). Some narratives that present these young people as being dishonest, undeserving or dangerous are highly racialised, gendered and associated with the young person’s age. Crimes committed by ‘UFM’ tend to cause great public alarm, even though the racist myths underlying such outrage have been debunked by research. Spanish data, for example, have shown that there are no differences in the number of offences committed by unaccompanied migrant adolescents and minors born in Spain. In fact, Spain-born youths commit more crimes than immigrant accompanied minors (Observatorio de la delincuencia [Crime Observatory], 2019).

It is important to reflect on how categories of ‘UFM’ and ‘young offenders’ have come to be constructed and implemented, and how this can shed some light on the social discourse that frames their life stories.

The Spanish context: causes and processes of youth migration

The main causes for the migration of minors do not differ significantly from the causes of adult migration (Schindel, 2017). The existing social, economic and political conditions ‘in the places of origin of young people, and the resulting lack of opportunities, have a clear influence on their decision to migrate’ (López-Reillo, 2011, p. 35).

At the time this study took place, most unaccompanied children who arrived in Spain came from Morocco (Bravo-Rodríguez, 2005), a country that has traditionally had large families, most of them with from between 5 to 9 members. On average, 8% of all family members migrate (Berriane and Aderghal, 2011, p. 72). Poor living conditions are common, as many households lack basic infrastructures such as water, electricity, sanitation, etc. Universal basic education is still far off from being reality, especially for girls, for whom the school enrolment rate is 64% (García-Andrés & López-Gallego, 2010, p. 59). Only 72% of boys and 51% of girls in Morocco attend primary education, and consequently illiteracy rates in Morocco are particularly high. School dropout and school failure remain a major problem for the public authorities

These harsh living conditions are further compounded by the knowledge that only a few kilometres away there is a different world and form of life. Technology and new media are powerful instruments that contribute to the globalisation of the lifestyles of ‘developed’ countries, and many young people in Morocco look to these countries as the answer to their

dreams of improving their living conditions and helping their families. However, once they arrive at the destination country, the result is seldom as ideal as expected.

Unaccompanied children on the move are sometimes intercepted by the police, in which case they are usually transferred to the services for the protection of minors. The majority of unaccompanied children are believed to avoid these controls and tend to face very challenging circumstances. Their illegal immigrant status can lead to exploitation through trafficking networks, which often force young people into prostitution or criminal activities (Rosales, 2014).

Methodology

This article is based on a study that had two main focuses, namely describing and analysing the key elements that had caused his story to take a radical turn; and finding out to what extent that process had been educational in nature.

The number of unaccompanied children on the move continues to grow. There are also many stereotypes that have become widespread concerning 'UFM' that have resulted in them being criminalised. Based on these two circumstances, which need to be urgently addressed, this article uses Ibrahim's story to focus on the situation that these minors live in. It is aimed to dismantle existing prejudices and highlight the reasons that drive these children to migrate on their own, despite all the risks involved. The paper seeks to transcend labels and serve as a reminder that they are children (at most adolescents), although too often they are objectified to serve the interests of others. Using a real case study can frame that situation in a positive manner and points to the lessons that can be learnt to improve certain aspects of the policies and practices concerning these children.

The subsections that follow explain the purpose for using the biographical methodology and describe the fieldwork carried out.

A life history approach

An overview of Ibrahim's life was necessary to understand the full story and identify those key aspects and experiences which helped change it. The panoramic perspective that the biographical method provides is one of the reasons why it was considered the best suited to this piece of research.

In order to understand a person's life, it is first necessary to decode the world in which that person lives. A reconstruction of an individual's biography requires a comprehensive contextualisation of the sociocultural environment. It is important to identify all those aspects that had a strong influence on the person's life, as well as the interaction of the different elements that have played a role in each sphere of the social fabric (family, economy, education, work, expectations, etc.).

Waller and Simmons (2009) noted that biographical research requires a quality which they compared to the ability of certain birds that are able to capture a panoramic view of the landscape while at the same time focusing attention specifically on a small point of interest. A biographical account must fuse both perspectives; it normally focuses on one important aspect of the subject's life (immigration, drugs, delinquency, youth rehabilitation process, etc.) and,

at the same time, pays attention to the backdrop, i.e. to the surrounding social characteristics. Ferrarotti (1991) defined life histories as a complex synthesis of social elements where the universality of society can be appreciated through the singular, namely the subject.

The cross-narrative method used here provided the opportunity to prepare a combined biographical account which allowed the story to be developed holistically. The protagonist provided the main plot for each chapter, which was supplemented with and/or contrasted by other accounts and information. All of this led to a complete, rigorous construction of the situation under study (Charry, 2017) and produced a polyhedral, significant and intersubjective text (Author and other, 2021).

This type of research gives a voice to people who are not usually heard, because they are in oppressed or minority social groups. These are people whose stories are not known in depth (in the case under discussion, the story of an 'UFM' and a 'Young Offender'), to generate counter-narratives that offer rigorous lessons, help the situation to be understood, highlight ethical positions in the pursuit of social justice (Susinos *et al.*, 2019; Caetano, 2015), and become another mean that tries to contribute to the social inclusion of this population (Pienimäki, 2021).

Fieldwork and research process

Multiple data-generating methods were used. The main information sources were interviews and documentary sources, along with photographs. Other materials were also prepared, and data collection instruments were used to conduct the study (see Table 1).

Various strategies for collecting data were used with Ibrahim. The main one was conducting five biographical interviews. He was over the age of eighteen when the fieldwork was carried out, which made data collection easier. This section shows that he actively participated in the research process.

In addition, other people who played a significant part in how the story unfolded were also interviewed. There were twelve respondents in total, some of whom played a double role and were interviewed accordingly:

- Ibrahim's brother.
- The judge who managed the case.
- The Deputy Director of the Detention Centre (DC) for 'young offenders'.
- A social worker at the DC, who later became Ibrahim's boss in the association where he currently works.
- Ibrahim's tutor at the DC.
- An educator at the DC, who would later become a member of the technical team.
- Two trainers at the DC, both of whom are now friends of Ibrahim's.
- A domestic worker at the DC, who later became Ibrahim's foster mother.
- Ibrahim's tutor during his probation period.
- An educator during Ibrahim's probation period.
- A work colleague who was also a flatmate and friend of Ibrahim's.

The following documentary sources were particularly important: Ibrahim's youth criminal court file; and Ibrahim's file held at the General Directorate for Youth Rehabilitation (the body

responsible for implementing the sentence issued by the judge). In addition, more than 200 photographs were collected, most of them taken at the DC (voluntarily provided by Ibrahim).

Table 1. Summary of other information sources and data collection techniques.

Ibrahim's biography was constructed by including all the aforementioned information. The convergence of data from those diverse sources and techniques led to the construction of a complex and comprehensive representation of the story (Bertaux, 2005).

Negotiation was used to establish equitable participation conditions, striving to achieve a horizontal structure. Some provisions were drawn up in order to ensure (a) the anonymity of the informants and of all the individuals appearing in the biography by using pseudonyms, and of all bodies and institutions; and (b) the confidentiality and protection of all data. Informed consent of all of this was given by all informants.

As can be seen in the table, unasked, one day Ibrahim handed the researcher a short manuscript of which an extract is shown below. It contained some reflections on what his current job meant to him, including what he had had to do to get it. This showed that the process was moving internally and helping him develop a broader framework for understanding his life.

‘This job attracted me for many reasons. For me, it is like I am cleaning something I unwittingly dirtied. Although I cannot go back and change what I did, I realise I helped contaminate people, especially youngsters. So, to me, this work is in exchange for something I cannot change. I also like my work to be important and have important results, such as helping others, not just being in it for myself’ (Ibrahim, Biography, p. 150).

All the information was member-checked by the informants at two different points, before and after analysis. The post-analysis member check involved returning the work to participants, placing special emphasis on the findings and conclusions reached. It was only fair to send this work to those who had kindly made it possible, and to give them a chance to discuss anything that they deemed appropriate. Everyone agreed with the study's results, but Ibrahim's reaction to this process was especially interesting. He was able to put his own history into perspective and to identify some points he had not considered before, which allowed to further his reflection.

All the information gathered was analysed using the qualitative data analysis programme NVivo. Categories of evidence underpinning the findings are discussed in the following section and were broken down as follows: (1) Immigration and delinquency, (2) The youth rehabilitation process, (3) Detention, (4) Probation, and (5) General aspects.

Results

The results are structured in two sections. The first one, shows the main reasons that led Ibrahim to migrate and join the gang, in narrative form. The second section lists the key factors that made his case take such a turn, in order to highlight the diversity of their nature (not only educational and individualistic), showing the transcendence of some of them.

Overview. Brief summary of Ibrahim's story

Ibrahim comes from a large family in northern Morocco, where he grew up in a poor semi-rural environment.

‘They don't have running water (...). His mother at her age had to do the washing by hand (...). That village is very poor in infrastructure, very poor’ (Domestic worker at the DC, and later Ibrahim's foster mother, Biography, p. 165).

His life and professional opportunities there were very limited and led him to reproduce his environment: unskilled jobs, low wages, long working hours, etc.

At the age of 13, he dropped out of school and started working in a cafeteria where he had to spend 12 hours every shift to earn one euro a day.

‘They gave me about thirty euros a month and I was working in the cafeteria, cleaning glasses and so on (...). I also started in the kitchen (...). One euro is 10 dirhams, I earned one euro a day. I went in at eight in the morning and finished at eight or nine at night’ (Ibrahim, Biography, pp. 21-23).

Having worked at low-paid jobs for a few years, he realised that there were people who lived better than him; that other countries, not far away, where the kind of living conditions he wanted existed; and there were people who migrated to access better living standards. This led him to think of ways to break away from the deterministic situation that haunted him. He thought that this break would be practically impossible in his home country, so he started to consider migrating to Spain.

‘People there [in Morocco] see Spain as having more freedom, you work, you earn money (...). The [official residence] papers are like a certificate, like a university degree’ (Ibrahim's brother, Biography, p. 170).

One day, he boarded a boat loaded with drugs and crossed the Strait of Gibraltar. He was paid 6000 euros for this ‘job’.

‘I decided to get involved when I saw how it all was, everything that had happened, how hard it is to do things right, and then there are people who do things wrong and have things better, easier, more comfortable. Me thinking long and seeing the results of some people who are still very young and have a great life, all easy, all good, and others who have been working all their bloody lives and everything is wrong...’ (Ibrahim, Biography, pp. 39-40).

From that day on, he started working for a gang from the south of Spain, organising boat landings and distributing the ‘merchandise’. More than a year later, the police arrested him. As he was under eighteen, he was sentenced to a two-year rehabilitation process. He adapted very well and tried to take advantage of the process in order to achieve his migration goal.

‘I believe that Ibrahim's success was down to himself, I never thought it was anything we did. The only thing we gave him was the opportunities, but he knew how to take

advantage of them' (Social worker at the DC, and later Ibrahim's boss in the association where he currently works, Biography, pp. 318-319).

At the end of the probation period, he was offered a job as an assistant officer for the protection of minors (mostly coming from Arab backgrounds). Some years later, he was promoted to educator. He continues to work there at present, more than fifteen years later.

'the bridge that took to me to a real life and that I had to cross one day was that centre [the Detention Centre]. That centre has remained for me like a door that caused me to change (...). An incredible opportunity, very good, very good (...). The centre was my support, it was necessary. It helped me a lot to get through' (Ibrahim, Biography, pp. 132).

The bridge that gave him the opportunity

Ibrahim had the opportunity to build that 'better life' because his youth rehabilitation process was personalised; in other words, it took into account both his individual and environmental characteristics. In addition to various pedagogical initiatives, other needs were also met that helped his case. Helping satisfy these needs was essential for his story to unfold as it did.

Below are the fifteen key factors considered essential for his case to have had such positive outcomes. Only five were educational (shown in italics), whereas the rest were of a different nature:

- Ibrahim's personal characteristics.
- He saw the rehabilitation process as an opportunity.
- He did not have a 'criminal profile', and had appropriate behavioural patterns.
- His biological family was a very important protective factor.
- Religiosity, as a source of values and principles.
- Detention (fundamental turning point).
- *The pedagogical characteristics of the DC (personalised care, a safe and trusting environment) proved to be ideal for Ibrahim.*
- *Placing Ibrahim in the DC section that best suited his characteristics avoided possible conflicts, which contributed to his growth.*
- *His tutor at the DC provided an educational purpose for the intervention.*
- *The official education system made it possible for him to have a Compulsory Education Certificate, which was essential for obtaining his current job.*
- *He had many opportunities to enjoy his freedom (permits) during internment at the DC, which facilitated the whole process.*
- The foster family remedied his vulnerable situation as an 'UFM', and provided him with a primary environment and point of reference.
- The social worker at the DC was essential for him to obtain legal resident status, foster care and, above all, employment.
- He created a social circle, and maintained contact with its members.
- His job provided him with sufficient income and stability. This allowed him to settle down permanently.

As can be seen, only a third of the aspects that were instrumental in Ibrahim turning his life around were pedagogical. The rest had to do with personal features and characteristics of the

environment or were initiatives of a different kind that occurred during the youth rehabilitation process. This reinforces the idea that in order to successfully work with at-risk minors it is essential to intervene in areas that go beyond the pedagogical processes.

It can therefore be inferred that interventions on at-risk unaccompanied minors must be at least socio-educational in nature, since change depends not only on the progress made in individual learning, but also on the ability to transform social circumstances. Therefore, action must be taken that combines the pedagogical and the social.

As an example of this, three non-educational keys that were implemented during Ibrahim's rehabilitation process and proved decisive for his story to take a positive turn will now be discussed.

The social worker at the DC

She was vital in the development of Ibrahim's story. The most important actions she carried out were: to help him obtain legal immigration status in Spain; to mediate in family foster care; and, above all, to provide him with his current job.

From the time Ibrahim entered the detention centre, he expressed his desire to permanently settle in Spain and obtain legal immigration status:

‘Ibrahim's progress

(...) Ibrahim wants to improve himself and has stated that he came to Spain with a desire to improve himself (...).

Ibrahim's prospects for the future

Ibrahim wants to live in Spain, because he believes that there are more opportunities here' (Initial report of the social worker at the DC, Biography, p. 200).

The social worker understood this and set to work to try to help him achieve that goal.

As Ibrahim was an 'UFM' detained in a centre for 'young offenders', the regional administration was obliged to take legal responsibility for him, which contributed favourably to him obtaining his immigration status (ID card for foreigners and different permits needed, such as those for residence and work). The social worker at the DC was key in bringing all relevant parts together to make this a reality.

‘I was a child of the ‘Junta de Andalucía’ [the Regional Council], everything was easy. Legally I only had to put the pieces together and we had them all’ (Ibrahim, Biography, p. 133).

The residence permit meant that he was able to obtain an ‘employment card’ at the job centre. It was time to find a regular job that would allow him to support himself when the rehabilitation process was over.

‘We used the passport to get the residence permit. We already had the residence permit, we had the passport, he was over sixteen years old [minimum legal age to work in Spain], we got the employment card, so at that point we were going to find him a job’ (Social worker at the DC, and later Ibrahim's boss in the association where he currently works, Biography, p. 216).

The foster family

Ibrahim's situation was complex, as not having any family in Spain made it impossible for him to use some of the available resources during the rehabilitation process (e.g. outings with relatives, weekends off, etc.).

However, while he was living at the DC, Ibrahim became very close to a lady who worked in the DC laundry. Their relationship became so strong that she offered to take Ibrahim out to spend time with her family whenever he was allowed to do so.

When his probation started, he could have been in a vulnerable situation. If he had been put on the street without ensuring that his basic needs were covered he would have been at risk. This would have made him almost destitute and very likely to re-join the drug traffickers he had been involved with before. Nevertheless, Ibrahim was fortunate to have been fostered by that lady and her family when he went on probation.

‘If it had not been for that lady, this child would have fallen into the hands of the gang again’ (Trainer at the DC who is now a friend of Ibrahim’s, Biography, p. 304).

The role this woman played in Ibrahim's story not only helped ensure the success of his internment in the centre, but also contributed to the evolution of the whole youth rehabilitation process.

Employment

Occupational integration was a priority objective in the rehabilitation process. The idea was that he would find a decent job that would provide him with the necessary income to become independent and settle down in Spain permanently.

The DC social worker was also vice-president of an association that implemented child protection measures. This association had a foster home for children, many of them Moroccans, who needed support, and it seemed Ibrahim’s profile was a good match to work there. As a result, she offered him a job there as a trainer.

‘I saw that he knew perfectly well how to handle difficult situations, his experience worked in his favour (...). And as I held a post in the association, when a trainer was needed for one of the centres linked to our association (...) I told the Chairman: (...) “I have a boy who is Moroccan, I think he is going to put that house in order, that house is chaos”.’ (Social worker at the DC, and later Ibrahim's boss in the association where he currently works, Biography, p. 303).

Today, more than fifteen years later, he continues to work there (having become an educator a few years ago). The job not only ensured he could have a place in the occupational fabric, but also allowed him to legalise his immigration status in Spain by obtaining a permanent residence permit, and settle down legally.

All this shows that, (1) the intervention processes must be personalised; and (2) for such processes to have a greater chance of success, it is essential to direct efforts to satisfy the different needs specific to each case.

‘the bridge that took to me to real life, and that I had to cross one day was that centre (...), there I was at a point that I didn't have to worry about where to sleep or where to eat because I had it covered. Then, I simply had to decide what I really wanted and take my path’ (Ibrahim, Biography, p. 132).

Discussion and conclusions: lessons to be learnt

Young immigrants are people at risk

As indicated above, the number of unaccompanied children on the move continues to grow in Europe. However, it is worrying that the challenges generated by this situation have not been adequately addressed. And what is even more worrying is that these children have been criminalised and rejected on a global level in recent years. The rise of extremist ideologies in Europe, Brexit, and the statements by the former US president on immigration largely account for this. Criminalisation and rejection that is becoming installed in the social imaginary through categories such as ‘UFM’ and ‘young offenders’. While these are an instrument to identify groups and articulate policies that help them, they are also being used to convey a dual and reductionist perception of these children, serve vested interests and ultimately, generate fear, manipulate the population and gain power.

For example, in the case studied here, although Ibrahim was certainly a ‘young offender’, it was thanks to this that he underwent the rehabilitation process that gave him the opportunity to take a radical turn in his life. Merely framing him as a ‘young offender’ neglects to consider the global underlying inequalities that led him to make certain decisions in his life. This leads to reconsidering how unaccompanied children on the move are often framed as criminals (Valles *et al.*, 2017), rather than as children at risk and in need. This stereotypical vision hides these children/adolescents behind the labels and prevents the situations of oppression that they experience from being visible (Schindel, 2017). These are extremely complex situations that should be approached from a structural point of view, rather than from an individual perspective that blames the minors for their circumstances.

These young people are threatened by many risks, as criminal organisations are eager to take advantage of them (Rosales 2014). This can be very serious for everyone, but particularly for children and adolescents, as they are at a very vulnerable and crucial stage in their development and this type of experience can have permanent consequences (Funes, 2008).

There is no direct correlation between migration and delinquency, although poverty, precariousness and need make people more vulnerable to engaging in criminal activities. These are risk factors which can lead to anti-social behaviour. The public authorities should take further steps to prevent this situation. It is necessary to combat pockets of poverty and improve the living conditions of those who endure these circumstances. Transforming this situation would almost certainly reduce the likelihood of anti-social behaviour and migration movements.

This is a complex phenomenon (Senovilla, 2017) that must be tackled through coordination between sending and receiving countries, as well as through supranational bodies (the European Union is the supranational body where most of the countries receiving unaccompanied minors are located). This makes possible to implement programmes that

address the problem at the root. Apart from providing more (material and human) resources, the parties involved need to liaise more efficiently in order to jointly draft policies and implement practices, especially in the countries of origin of these minors, in order to correct and prevent this situation.

Socioeducational, personalised, ecological and empowering intervention to enable unaccompanied minors to transform their reality

As every case is unique, different aspects and needs must be satisfied on an individual basis (Dowds, 2019). Any intervention programme needs to be personalised and holistic. As shown, the intervention with Ibrahim included many different elements as and when needed. Some of them were educational and others were social. Educational and social aspects cannot be separated (particularly in this type of cases, where social issues have a strong presence). The development of these children is generally achieved by considering the circumstances in which they find themselves and the unique characteristics of each individual case (Pérez, 2012).

Dealing with a minor immersed in a social problem means that special attention must be given to the multiple elements that make up the minor's situation. Special emphasis should be placed on the need to deal with the social dimension by taking an individualised perspective, since intervening in this area is often a determinant factor in the child evolving satisfactorily. This is why the framework for this type of intervention should be ecological (Winters, 2020; Author and others, 2020a, Rosenow *et al.*, 2019), which means that the various dimensions involved are interrelated and need to evolve in different ways. In that sense, networking is the most suitable approach to carry out the different actions required.

Attempting to carry out a process based solely on one type of aspect (e.g. educational areas) without considering the influence of other areas, makes it almost impossible to reach the goals set. Intervention should not focus only on transforming the individual but must also help newly shape the child's social circumstances.

It seems clear that change requires providing support for the individual in transforming their own situation. Therefore, (1) professionals must understand the complexity of each situation, in order to design a suitable complex intervention for the minor (Biagioli *et al.*, 2018); and (2) it is necessary to provide support for educatees to reconfigure their situation.

Actions which help to correct and/or counteract the risk factors surrounding the individual should therefore be considered throughout the intervention process. At the same time, greater emphasis must be placed on the protection factors of the case (Author and others, 2020b), by relying on those already existing and enabling as many as necessary. In Ibrahim's history, there were a variety of diverse and complementary protective factors (family, religion, detention, employment, legalisation, etc.). This meant that the necessary conditions were provided for him to achieve his migration and life goals.

All those elements contributed to the fact that Ibrahim did not internalise the different status assigned to him ('young offender' & 'UFM') and managed to build his own identity (Chen *et al.*, 2012). Castells (1997) said that identities are individually made sources of meaning. It seems clear that those categories/labels were circumstantial for Ibrahim. They resulted from the path he chose to transform his life, but they did not have an intrinsic meaning for him.

By taking a combination of different actions based on this approach, these minors could be given a chance to break away from deterministic assumptions and write their own story.

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TABLE

<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Legislation:<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Law 5/2000, of 12 January 2000, regulating the Criminal Responsibility of Minors.· Law 8/2006, of 5 December 2006, amending Law 5/2000, regulating the Criminal Responsibility of Minors.- SWOT with all the informants- Unexpected information: Manuscript prepared by Ibrahim ('Meaning of work') + Interview.- Pre-analysis member check (twice for Ibrahim and once for the rest of informants).- Researcher's notebook.- Materials drafted:<ul style="list-style-type: none">· Biogram· Sociogram + Interview

Table 1. Summary of other information sources and data collection techniques.