

Social work and ecosystem resilience among young migrants at social risk in Spain. Educational research squared (ER²)

David Herrera-Pastor *

Theory and History of Education, Social Pedagogy and Research Methods and Diagnosis in Education Department, University of Malaga, Spain

*Corresponding author. Facultad de Ciencias de la Educación, Campus de Teatinos, 29071 Málaga, Spain. E-mail: d.herrera@uma.es

Abstract

This article stems from the EU project ‘Learning from the margins’ (LEMA), which examined the circumstances of young people experiencing social exclusion as well as carrying out inclusive socio-educational interventions to address the challenges they faced. The part of the study conducted in Spain focused on young migrants and sought to analyse the ecosystem resilience experienced by participants affiliated with a third-sector organization involved in the project. An Educational Research Squared (ER²) methodology was used which combined social work with an enquiry-based approach. ER² is a socio-educational intervention for young people, structured around a multimodal approach that integrates environmental, critical, and inclusive dimensions. The enquiry-based approach included lifelines of the young migrants, a young migrants’ focus group, a SWOT analysis for socio-educational professionals, a professionals’ focus group, and analytical diaries of university students volunteering for the project. The results were structured into three categories: *Dreams*, *Barriers*, and *Support*. Despite facing numerous barriers, the young participants continued to seek opportunities to realize their migration aspirations, which became more attainable when suitable support systems were available. The creation of a social fabric and their interaction with people contributed to the development of a resilient ecosystem.

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of
The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Keywords: ecosystem resilience; educational research squared; social fabric; social work; youth at social risk.

Accepted: February 2026

Introduction

This article is based on the research conducted within the EU project ‘Learning from the margins. Social inclusion of highly marginalized young people urban settings’ (ref. 2019-1-DK01-KA203-060285), implemented in three countries (Denmark, Sweden, and Spain). It aimed to gain insights into the experiences of young individuals living in marginalized circumstances, with the goal of promoting their social inclusion.

There were two partners in each country: One university and one third-sector organization that carried out socio-educational programmes for young people who experienced marginalization. The participants from each country had autonomy over the implementation of the project and were able to adapt it according to their respective idiosyncrasies. In Spain, as a request of the participating third-sector organization, research was conducted with a group of young migrants formerly in care. Within the broader framework outlined above, the specific aim was to analyse the resilience experienced by these young migrants during their migration process. Resilience was understood from an ecosystem perspective that surpasses the individualist approach (Ruiz-Román and Herrera-Pastor 2020). This manuscript reports on the findings of the project undertaken in Spain.

The project methodology was called Educational Research Squared (ER²). The letter ‘E’, which represents education, was raised to the second power to indicate its dual nature. The first aspect of ER² focused on conducting pedagogical research on a socio-educational issue, while the second aspect involved implementing socio-educational actions (social work) aimed at young people. The study used various sources to collect information, including the participating young individuals, the professionals working with them, and the university students volunteering for the project. The data collection techniques employed included lifelines and biographical interviews, focus groups, SWOT analyses, and analytical diaries.

The analytical process followed the grounded theory approach, and the study’s results were categorized into three main themes: *Dreams, Barriers, and Support*. The participants’ dreams held great significance, as they gave purpose to the migration journey and fuelled their determination to persevere. These young people encountered various barriers, and the vulnerable position they entered upon turning eighteen was exacerbated by the challenges associated with irregular migration during this phase of their lives. These obstacles sometimes took the form of prejudice, which

hindered their social and professional advancement, among other aspects. Conversely, they received support through various channels, although there was a need for additional resources and optimization of specific procedures. The most noteworthy form of support was the one characterized as 'genuine'. The ER² methodology proved to be a crucial source of support, and an ideal approach for conducting research and social work actions concurrently.

The findings show that support is an enabling and empowering factor for young participants to overcome barriers and pursue their dreams. Resilient ecosystems are needed to operate as protective environments and support the healthy development of all individuals (in this case young migrants).

Theoretical framework

This section provides a state-of-the-art overview of the population group with whom the study was conducted in Spain, i.e. young migrants formerly in care. It also discusses the epistemological approaches used in the specific research focus adopted, namely ecosystem resilience.

Young migrants formerly in care

There has been a notable increase in migration flows from Africa to Europe since the 1990s, involving a growing number of minors travelling alone (Senovilla 2017). These children and adolescents are referred to as 'Unaccompanied Foreign Minors' (United Nations 2005). Upon identification in Spain, they are officially recognized as being in a vulnerable situation and become sheltered by various protective measures (Article 172.1 of the Spanish Civil Code). However, when these young individuals come of age they face a challenge, as these protective provisions no longer apply to the same extent, often leaving them in precarious circumstances. At this stage, they are classified as 'young people formerly in care', specifically, 'young migrants formerly in care'. This group is the focal point of this article.

According to Spain's Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration, in September 2025 there were 16,606 young migrants formerly in care aged between 18 and 23 with residence permits in Spain (2025). The main countries of origin of these young migrants were Morocco (from where more than half, specifically, 54%, originated), followed by Gambia (13%), Algeria (11%), and Senegal (9%); 94% of them were male. A significant proportion were integrated into the labour market, with 71% being registered within the Social Security system.

In the Spanish region of Andalusia, where the study took place (Law 1 1998), concerning the Rights and Care of Minors, stipulates that the authorities will provide assistance to these youths, particularly in the first year after leaving the protection facility, to ensure their social and vocational integration

(Article 37.2). This involves implementing programmes that facilitate such integration and enable them to become fully autonomous (Article 19.1.f). *Programme +18* was created for this purpose. It was implemented through two different arrangements. One includes high-level provision, which essentially entails the availability of ‘independent-living flats’. The other arrangement (mid-level provision) involves different types of actions taken by a network of organizations to facilitate social and employment integration for these young people.

[Law 26 \(2015\)](#), concerning the Legal Protection of Minors within the child and adolescent protection system, led to a state-wide improvement of the applicable regulations regarding the emancipation of young migrants formerly in care. It explicitly recognized the need to implement programmes to prepare these particularly vulnerable young people for independent living (specifically, Articles 11.4 and 22, sub-section 2). However, the Federation of organizations with assisted-living projects and flats ([FEPA 2020](#)) reported that only a few regions have dedicated support programmes for young migrants formerly in care. Hence, the majority of these young people struggle to meet their basic needs regarding housing, sustenance, education, and employment, and live in highly vulnerable conditions. These challenges are further compounded by the obstacles they encounter in regularizing their stay in the country and the difficulties inherently associated with their migrant status, including language barriers, limited support networks, and social prejudice.

While both formal and informal socio-educational support resources are usually provided in the migrant trajectories of these young people, evidence shows the imperative need to improve their socio-educational support networks for inclusion. They are currently confronted with a dearth of opportunities that manifests in social marginalization, including unemployment, job insecurity, low income, and homelessness ([Santana et al. 2018](#); [Ruiz et al. 2019](#); [Gullo et al. 2021](#)). While some socio-educational programmes are being developed to promote their social inclusion ([Herrera-Pastor et al. 2022](#)) that usually encompass food and accommodation, training actions, and/or employment guidance, research has indicated that these efforts remain insufficient and lack a personalized approach ([Del Valle et al. 2008](#)) which could provide comprehensive coverage, including mental health ([Yates and Grey 2012](#); [Cassarino-Perez et al. 2018](#); [Sulimani-Aidan 2020](#)). Findings have suggested that these young individuals need more consistent socio-educational support to enable them to cultivate resilience and successfully pursue their life goals.

Ecosystem resilience

In recent years, the concept of resilience has undergone a significant transformation within the realm of the social sciences. In its early days, it

was viewed from a person-centred perspective, focusing primarily on individual abilities (Werner and Smith 1982). Based on some research findings, resilience came to be understood not merely as a personality trait, but as a dynamic, complex, and interactive process (Rutter 1987). Interacting with the environment can stimulate the development of qualities that enable individuals to overcome adversity. Context can operate as a protective factor that supports the development of resilience. Garmezy (1985) classified protective factors as individual, familial, and social or extra-familial, which helped frame resilience as a capacity that can be nurtured across multiple domains and levels, from the micro to the meso and macro contexts. This is where social work and socio-educational action play a key role. Ungar (2015) described resilience as a systemic process in which each individual's physical and social ecologies can provide useful resources. The different public systems and services, such as education, health, social services, and employment, should ensure that the ecosystems that every individual is immersed in offer resources that serve as protective factors, particularly for vulnerable populations. This is what we term ecosystem resilience.

Manciaux (2003) argued that society has an obligation to provide the support necessary for resilience to flourish. State institutions at different levels (national, regional, and local) should use social work to lead the review of mechanisms that generate adverse structural conditions and ensure the creation of a healthy social fabric in each context. The kind of social fabric that translates into protective factors and promotes resilience.

Ecosystem resilience must be accompanied by the development of a culture of support in which all social actors, especially the most influential ones, including the overall population, recognize their shared responsibility and act accordingly. This culture should be fostered through critical, ethical, humanistic, and holistic education grounded in the common good (UNESCO 2015).

Methodology

The general focus of the project was to analyse the circumstances faced by marginalized youth in each country in order to contribute to their social inclusion. Given that the group under study in Spain was formed by young migrants formerly in care, a specific objective was added, namely, to examine the ecosystem resilience experienced by these young people. The evidence presented in this article is drawn from the research conducted in that country.

The methodology used was Educational Research Squared (ER²). This methodology is described in subsections 3.1 and 3.2. Section 3.2 discusses the relationship between research and socio-educational interventions among young people, and provides an overview of its underpinning assumptions. Subsection 3.3 presents the fieldwork carried out in the study. Finally,

subsection 3.4 addresses the processes concerned with data categorization and scientific ethics.

Educational research squared (ER²)

Educational Research (ER) is any scientific inquiry or study conducted on an educational issue from a pedagogical perspective. Educational Research Squared (ER²) refers to educational research that incorporates not only the elements mentioned above but also entails an interconnected socio-educational action (social work) conducted alongside the research. 'E', which stands for education, was raised to the second power to signify that it occurs in a twofold manner: (1) highlighting the socio-pedagogical nature of the research and (2) incorporating within it a social work (socio-educational) intervention (Herrera-Pastor et al. 2025). This research encompasses a socio-educational intervention with young migrants which was at the core of the study. Indeed, without this intervention, the research would not have been conducted with the same level of coherence and depth it achieved. And conversely, neither would the young participants have benefitted from the intervention.

ER² is a highly versatile method with a distinct character, which offers a fully open-ended approach in terms of its object of study, research aims, procedures, and techniques. It is particularly well suited to socio-critical research and to work with minority groups requiring empowering and inclusive processes.

Foundations of the integration between the research process and socio-educational intervention

The research was carried out in Spain through a social work process, specifically, a socio-educational intervention involving the young participants. The following section describes the main actions that shaped this intervention. It outlines the socio-pedagogical underpinning employed and illustrates the interconnected research activities undertaken. This will contribute to a better understanding of the ER² method.

The exploratory work involved analysing the young participants' migration stories from the viewpoint of ecosystem resilience. The socio-educational intervention was a combination of the *environmental, critical, and inclusive approaches*, a comprehensive model that enabled a more far-reaching socio-pedagogical and research action.

The aim of the *environmental approach* was to establish a suitable setting for the project. It was not thought advisable to undertake work with young people without first creating a trusting environment. The work plan entailed holding weekly meetings (3–4 hours per session) over two 3-month

periods. As they were unfamiliar with the project, it was decided that the intervention would be conducted in a leisurely, informal manner. The first sessions were therefore entirely recreational and focused on creating an environment of trust, building relationships and developing a sense of connection (Herrera-Pastor et al. 2020a) between the various participants (young migrants, volunteers, educators, and researchers). The activities proposed in the sessions were agreed upon with the young participants or explicitly requested by them, which generated interest and motivation, as well as strengthening their involvement in the project (Iglesias et al. 2023). This enabled them to benefit from the various aims of the intervention and research.

The intervention and research was built on the strength of this environment. The sessions used a combined approach, as they were structured around leisure, social, sporting, or cultural activities. A time slot was then dedicated to studying their migration trajectories. Pair work was used to facilitate this task. Each participant was supported by a volunteer, educator, or researcher. The volunteers were students of the Degree in Social Education, the educators were professionals from the organization and the researchers worked at the University. Each of them was properly briefed on the tasks to be completed. They all attended every session, participated in the recreational activities that took place in the first part of the meetings, and then the pairs broke up to work independently. This provided a more personal, private space.

The second approach adopted in the intervention was the *critical* one. The *socio-educational accompaniment intervention* model (Herrera-Pastor et al. 2020b) was used to implement this approach. It is based on walking alongside the other person to provide them with socio-pedagogical support and guidance along the way. The use of pair learning played a crucial strategic role at this stage.

Thought-provoking questions were used to encourage the young participants to reflect on their migration experiences. These reflections culminated in a focus group session in which they engaged in a lively discussion of the more substantive issues that had emerged during their individual interactions. These steps were designed to support their critical thinking about their own situations. As a result, they received socio-educational support that helped lay the foundations for a comprehensive understanding of their circumstances (Mangone and Masullo 2023). This process proved empowering and strengthened their capacity to cope with situations of risk.

The *inclusive* approach was implemented across the previous two on a cross-cutting basis. The aim sought by using the prior perspectives was also to contribute to their full social development.

A crucial aspect of the entire project was the participation of volunteers, a group of university students of the same age as the young migrants who took part in the study. Their involvement not only contributed to expand the social circle of these young people but also gave them the chance to engage with the local community. This interaction was highly rewarding

for the participants, as it helped them realize that they were fulfilling their migration aspirations and bolstered their motivation to persevere.

Fieldwork

The research was carried out by the University of Malaga in Spain and a third-sector organization that supports migrant people's integration. This association implemented a transition-to-adulthood programme with young migrants formerly in care. Specifically, it had two 'independent-living flats' which accommodated up to six people. Both flats were for males only, and only Moroccan boys aged between 18 and 21 years lived in them during the research process. In addition to covering their basic needs (food and accommodation), the association also provided them with various forms of direct and indirect support by networking with other educational, legal, professional, and social organizations to help them regularize their stay in Spain and become emancipated.

Although the project employed additional data collection techniques and sources of information, the following sections describe those used for this manuscript:

Lifelines

In order to meet the research objective described above, the first step was to study the migration trajectory of the participating young migrants. This started with each person setting out a 'Lifeline'. The lifeline is a technique used in biographical research that entails visually depicting a person's life in chronological order, noting the significant milestones or events occurred (Gramling and Carr 2004). In this case, a graphical representation was employed, by placing on a timeline summaries of the experiences that had been important in the life story of the subject of study. Lifelines were created for eight young people (the rest did not wish to do so or were unable to participate due to training or work-related commitments). Each of them responded to biographical interviews on 4 occasions; therefore, a total of 32 of these interviews were conducted.

Young migrants' focus group

The biographical study culminated in a focus group session in which they jointly reflected on the most substantive aspects that had emerged from the lifeline processes. The discussion dealt with the complex situation in which they found themselves, which was analysed from a critical perspective. Their resilient character was assessed and potential pathways for progress were envisioned.

The focus group included primarily young migrants who had completed their lifelines, alongside other young individuals who were related to the association, even if they were not residing in the coming-of-age programme flats. In total, nine young people discussed the commonalities and divergences in their life stories for 2 hours.

Professionals' SWOT analysis

In order to explore the perspective of the professionals working with these young people, a joint SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analysis session was organized to discover their findings regarding the processes involved in the social integration of the participating young migrants formerly in care.

The session was held online and lasted 1 hour. Four professionals participated: two of them were members of the association (the project coordinator and the educator responsible for the coming-of-age programme), and the other two were professionals from other organizations belonging to the socio-educational network with which the association collaborated. The former belonged to the agency that provided primary care to young people in this situation, and the latter was responsible for mid-level service provision where some activities were carried out with young people. These diverse profiles made it possible to gather testimonies from different perspectives of this ecosystem.

Professionals' focus group

In another session, a 2-hour focus group was held with the same professionals with whom the SWOT had been conducted. This session covered similar aspects to those addressed in the focus group of young migrants, although they were analysed from a professional perspective, which made it possible to compare both perspectives.

Analytical diaries by university student volunteers

Four students from the Degree in Social Education at the University of Malaga volunteered to participate in the project. Their main task was to provide socio-educational support to the group of young migrants. This was carried out on a weekly basis in two phases which lasted approximately 3 months each. The ultimate goal was inclusion, considering that the university students were approximately the same age as the young people who participated in the project but came from a different background. This opened up new opportunities for all participants involved. Once they had completed their accompaniment period, the four students

handed in an analytical diary based on their experience, which was incorporated into the project as a record.

Categorization of data and scientific ethics

A triangulation of data collection methods (thirty two biographical interviews, eight lifelines, one SWOT analysis, two focus groups, and four analytical diaries) and sources of information (young migrants formerly in care, various professionals from a related network, and university students) were used.

Categories were created following the *Grounded theory* approach (Glaser and Strauss 1980) using the data analysis software ATLAS.ti (version 7.5). The following categories of analysis were identified: *Dreams, Barriers and Support*.

The terms of participation were negotiated with all informants, who gave their consent. The identities of the persons and organizations to which the testimonies referred remained confidential. Confidentiality of the information was also guaranteed in accordance with scientific ethics and applicable data protection regulations in Spain. The research was certified by the Ethics Committee of Experimentation of the University of Malaga (reference number of said certificate: 123-2023-H).

Results

The results from the analysis of the categories (*Dreams, Barriers and Support*) are outlined below.

Dreams: 'A better future'. 'A normal life'

The shared dream of these young people was to achieve a better life. Living conditions were harsh and prospects for the future appeared bleak in their country of origin. These young migrants did not want to resign themselves to the life that they seemed doomed to have; irregular migration was one of the alternatives they found to try to change their situation.

We left our country to improve our lives (Mohamed, Lifeline).

Their dreams were not about excess or opulence; rather, they aspired to have what would be a 'normal' life for other people: a decent job, a decent family, and a decent home. Their circumstances prevented them from building that life project in their places of origin. Incidentally, their life project was not only intended to be for them, but also to help their families so that their descendants could have better life expectations.

My dream is to be a normal person, working (...). I want to be a hairdresser (Hassan, Lifeline).

My dream is to have a house, a family, a child (Achraf, Lifeline).

I came to Spain to look for a good future. To work, to help my family (Jahir, Lifeline).

I don't want what happened to me [lack of opportunities] to happen to my children. I want them to grow up in a country where they have rights, so that they can fulfil [the dreams that] I have not been able to fulfil (Ousmane, Lifeline).

The living conditions that they believed exist in Europe seemed to satisfy their expectations in life. By migrating to Spain they hoped to have greater opportunities to realize their dreams.

[Spain] is a country of law and (...). A waiter in Morocco works without a contract or anything, and perhaps earns €270 a month, without social protection or anything (Ousmane, young migrants' focus group).

In Morocco, young people from the working classes are often able to find unskilled jobs with precarious working conditions, working long hours within the black economy for very low wages. The purchasing power the majority of them have is insufficient for emancipation and full autonomy. In these circumstances, they could not envisage a life project such as the one they longed for.

With that income just eating and buying some clothes and that's it. I can't buy a house or anything ... (Jahir, Lifeline).

Barriers: 'We are not equal'. 'If you are good, you have to prove it'

Once they embarked on their migration journey, they faced a variety of barriers. The most significant are presented below.

All the participating young migrants were critical of the situation that often arises when they come of age. At this point, the child protection mechanisms that protected them cease to exist and they have to live by their own means, which is often extremely difficult for them due to their circumstances (irregular status, homelessness, often extreme poverty, unemployment, insufficient income, linguistic and cultural disadvantage, stigma, etc.). This makes it difficult for them to become integrated in society and, moreover, to meet the requirements to be able to regularize their immigration status, which is what they need as a matter of priority.

Without papers it is very difficult, really (Rahim, Lifeline).

Another significant obstacle is bureaucracy, partly because of the continuous barriers imposed on them and partly because these young people are not used to fulfilling administrative procedures (language, requirements, forms, deadlines, etc.). They found this frustrating and discouraging.

The system excludes them. There are many administrative hurdles (Nabil, Professionals' SWOT analyses).

Prejudice towards people who migrate irregularly is a hindrance that undermines their way of being in the receiving country. The participating migrants felt uneasy about being labelled and treated unfairly. This conditions the development of their identity and, as a consequence, their inclusion.

Many people in the street think that we are going to mug them (...).
[That we are] not good people (Rahim, Lifeline).

When they hear that someone has stolen something, they think we are all the same (Achraf, Lifeline).

[But] we are not equal (Jahir, Lifeline).

These stereotypes, which are so widespread in the social imaginary, further complicate their already difficult situation. For example, by conditioning the perception of employers and, therefore, affecting such crucial aspects as job searching, which plays a major role in terms of how their situation fares. They have to continually demonstrate that they are not these clichés, in order to try to dismantle the mistrust that often exists towards them in the first place.

To get a job we need people to trust us, because there are a lot of people who don't trust us (...). On the [social] media there are pictures of thieves, unaccompanied foreign minors... who do this and that and so on, but they don't know that there are bad people and good people among us. We want people to trust us. This way it'll be easier for us to get a job (...). If you are good, you have to prove it (Hakim, young migrants' focus group).

Support: Holistic. 'Genuine'. 'The golden key'

Support is a key element in facing adversity, overcoming barriers, and sustaining dreams. This section will review the main support networks that these young people encountered in their journey.

When they turned 18, many of them left the centres for the protection of minors and headed for the Spanish city where they felt they would have the best chance of continuing their migration journey. Informal networks proved to be significant sources of support at crucial times.

I came to this city because I have friends here from the centre for the protection of minors and from my country. They can help me a bit. And I also know a nice local person who does what he can to help me [...] where to sleep and where to eat (Jahir, Lifeline).

Jahir was homeless for 2 months. At first, he shared a shack with another young man. Then he moved to another place where someone gave him a mattress and brought him food every day. After that time he went into a shelter. Finally, the association involved in the project found a place

for him in one of the independent-living flats for young migrants who had formerly been in care.

When I arrived, I'd been living on the street. In the street you go hungry, you get cold, there are bad people... The street is very painful (Jahir, Lifeline).

The association helps us a lot with housing, to live, to eat, they help you with papers, with your difficulties and everything (Mohamed, Lifeline).

The city where the project is located has several organizations that try to cover the basic needs of the most vulnerable people (accommodation, food, hygiene, etc.). Some organizations (such as the association that participated in the project) also support them in tackling other issues: providing them with formal training, helping them to learn Spanish, supporting them in regularizing their immigrant status and overcoming administrative barriers, and providing them with legal advice. They also assist them in job searching and finding vocational training.

Many of these actions are referred to other organizations, which requires inter-organization coordination. This is a joint effort to provide each young person with holistic and inclusive basic development: meeting basic physical and safety needs, and helping them to become integrated into society.

The young people who participated in the study remembered professionals who provided crucial support in their journey. They stressed their role because they felt that they had 'really' wanted to help them.

There are educators who do a perfect job. They are good people. They are right. They don't forget anyone. And they want to help. Yes, they really work (Rahim, Lifeline).

These professionals' strong belief in their work was frequently highlighted, as they found that it was a potential catalyst for change and improved their lives. They were fully aware of the interplay among the different actors and agents within the existing socio-educational context.

One of our strengths is those of us who are involved in this believe in it (Clara, SWOT professionals).

... mutual support. Each team member contributes to the full extent of their potential' (Mahdi, Professionals' focus group).

The project covered in this article has become a very strong source of support for young people, including in terms of overcoming hard times; to the extent that some even considered it to be a family.

Thanks to the project we play, have fun, watch football, go for a coffee. I like this project because [it helps us] not to feel alone at home. For example, we don't get to that time when you run out of patience and feel bad (...). I feel good [about the project] because now we are like a family, now everyone has another family (Hakim, young migrants' focus group).

The university student volunteers played a key role in these developments. They established good relationships with the young migrants that exceeded the scope of the project. This enabled the young migrants to broaden their social circle by interacting with local peers of their own age, fostering a sense of inclusiveness. Some even became friends and their relationship continues to this day. Here are Ousmane's words about Juan Angel, a university student volunteer:

You are a positive person, brother (...). I thought our relationship was only in the project. I said: 'This is where it ends'. But as I reminded you, we have been talking and keeping in touch almost for the whole of the lockdown ... That was one thing. And also, after the lockdown, in your free time you invited me to your house and so on. I already know many of your friends and all. And whenever I am with you, you take a bit of time to help me stay positive and to keep fighting; that is something that gives me hope, brother (Lifeline).

Despite these forms of support, there are still gaps in other areas. When the participants were asked about this, they agreed that having a job that would enable them to regularize their immigration status would be key to achieving stability in other areas of their lives.

Mahmoud: Job opportunities.

Mohamed: Work, contract.

Abdul: I'll tell you two things to be happy: Work and papers.

Omar: It changes your life.

Abdul: It changes your life very quickly. With that, you find yourself a wife and your own house, and you're at peace (Young migrants' focus group).

A job is a golden key (Ousmane, young migrants' focus group).

Discussion and conclusions

The three categories analysed, namely, *Dreams*, *Barriers*, and *Support*, are the backbone of the migration trajectories of these young people. They are consistent with those found in other similar studies (Hiles et al. 2014).

The dreams of young migrants emerge against the backdrop of the oppressive situation in their home countries, as they are fully aware that people live differently in other places. In an attempt to fulfil their dreams, they often take many risks and make enormous sacrifices (Senovilla 2017). It is remarkable that theirs are not dreams of grandeur, but they aspire to live with basic standards that allow them to grow as people, to help their families in their countries of origin, and to provide better opportunities for their descendants. Their driving force is to turn the inequality they

experience into equitable opportunities, and to decide about their own life. An ethical and liberating component can be discerned in their motivations. This is what gives a sense of purpose to the processes experienced by these young people and becomes the cornerstone on which they can build resilience (Vanistendael 2015).

These young people face many adversities along the way. The situation they are confronted with when they turn 18, having to live by their own means after leaving the child protection system, is often extremely difficult. To minimize its impact and promote a smoother transition, the socio-educational preparation to be provided beforehand must be optimized, taking into account the various risks they are likely to face in circumstances of vulnerability and disadvantage (Yates and Grey 2012; Sulimani-Aidan 2020). On the other hand, they are troubled by the prejudices that often exist against their population group, especially because the native population usually fails to empathize with their situation; the bad behaviour displayed by one young migrant should not tar them all with the same brush. Such prejudices create an atmosphere of mistrust around them that complicates their daily lives, encourages exclusion and/or segregation, and restricts interaction. These young migrants have to continually prove that they can be trusted. The challenge for societies that pursue inclusion is to transform this stereotypical culture into one that is more respectful of diversity. This is a clear example of the culture of obstacles or the culture of support referred to in the theoretical framework. While it is not the only factor involved, education plays a key role in this process. Education is not solely the responsibility of those within the education system and families. It also falls on the most influential groups in society, such as politicians, the media, and employers, among others. In essence, this is a collective responsibility shared among all social agents, including citizens, as we all play a role in shaping and upholding the culture we live in. For this reason, it is necessary to educate the population as a whole in order to raise awareness of co-responsibility in this respect, to ensure that everyone can act accordingly within their own position.

Support networks seek to contribute to overcoming barriers and enabling dreams, promoting equity and ethics (Parry and Weatherhead 2014). This kind of support often manifests in different forms (formal, informal, etc.). The aim is to deliver comprehensive care through the amalgamation of high-level and mid-level provision. Nonetheless, there is an imperative need to enhance the personalization and consistency of the transition processes, enabling the young individuals to achieve complete emancipation and autonomy (Del Valle et al. 2008; Cassarino-Perez et al. 2018). The professionals who 'really' support them are significant players [resilience mentors (Cyrulnik 2001)] in this protection ecosystem. For its part, the empowering, emancipatory, and inclusive process of Educational Research Squared (ER²) has an important methodological impact. It is

suitable for combining research and social work (socio-educational interventions), especially with people at risk.

As can be seen, the combination of different forms of support contributes to the creation of a resilient ecosystem that helps young migrants overcome adversity. It also highlights that the various forms of social work are key elements in building healthy developmental environments.

The social state and the rule of law must try to eliminate structural risks and provide specific protective factors. To do so, as [Madariaga \(2014\)](#) noted, it must ensure that the social fabric needed for each specific context is in place. It should plant a warp at the necessary levels (macro, meso, micro) and provide the weft so that the social fabric can be woven for the suitable development of all people ([Molina-Cuesta 2022](#)). All the elements should form a social tapestry that will operate in different ways. One element would be to provide handles to grasp onto during adversity, preventing the individual being dragged down. Another would be to place a tightrope walker's net that protects against a fatal outcome in case of failure, and gives people a second chance. And a final one would be to offer leverage points that become driving forces for individuals.

Currently, one of the main challenges for social work policy and practice is to ensure that both adopt an ecosystemic approach. The different public administrations, which are ultimately responsible for the social actions carried out with this group, must understand they are interdependent, and must overcome the existing fragmentation in order to achieve more holistic and sustainable responses to these issues. This requires addressing them collaboratively, as well as implementing measures and creating mechanisms that enable genuine network-based social work ([Herrera-Pastor et al. 2025](#)).

Acknowledgements

I thank all informants for their generous and selfless contributions. And this paper is dedicated to all the young migrants who, despite the difficulties, continue to fight to achieve their dreams. Also to all the protection agents, factors and supports that contribute to this.

Conflicts of interest. None declared.

Funding

This article emerges from the European project: *Learning from the margins. Social inclusion of highly marginalized young people urban settings* (ref. 2019-1-DK01-KA203-060285), funded by the European Commission (European Union), within the Erasmus+ program 'Strategic higher education partnerships'. <https://erasmus-plus.ec.europa.eu/projects/search/details/2019-1-DK01-KA203-060285>. Each country had autonomy over the

implementation of the project and were able to adapt it according to their respective idiosyncrasies. This manuscript results from the research project performed in Spain.

Funding for open access publication: University of Malaga / CBUA.

References

- Cassarino-Perez, L. et al. (2018) 'Transition from Care to Adulthood: A Systematic Review of Intervention Programs', *Trends in Psychology*, 26: 1665–81. <https://doi.org/10.9788/TP2018.3-19En>
- Cyrułnik, B. (2001) *La Maravilla Del Dolor: El Sentido de la Resiliencia [The Wonder of Pain: The Meaning of Resilience]*. Buenos Aires: Granica.
- Del Valle, J. F. et al. (2008) 'Adult Self-Sufficiency and Social Adjustment in Care Leavers from Children's Homes: A Long-Term Assessment', *Child and Family Social Work*, 13: 12–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2206.2007.00510.x>
- FEPA (2020) *La Emancipación De Jóvenes Tutelados Y Extutelados En España [The Emancipation of Young People in Care and Former Care in Spain]*. <https://bit.ly/3qgFk6W>, accessed 5 Aug. 2025.
- Garnezy, N. (1985) 'Stress-Resistant Children: The Search for Protective Factors', in J. E. Stevenson (ed.) *Recent Research in Developmental Psychopathology. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry Book Supplement*, 4, pp. 213–33. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Glaser, B., and Strauss, A. (1980) *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. U.S.A.: Aldine.
- Gramling, L. F., and Carr, R. L. (2004) 'Lifelines: A Life History Methodology', *Nursing Research*, 53: 207–10. <https://doi.org/10.1097/00006199-200405000-00008>
- Gullo, F. et al. (2021) 'Crossing Countries and Crossing Ages: The Difficult Transition to Adulthood of Unaccompanied Migrant Care Leavers', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18: 6935. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18136935>
- Herrera-Pastor, D., Juárez, J., and Ruiz-Román, C. (2020a) 'Collaborative Leadership to Subvert Marginalisation. The Workings of a Socio-Educational Network in Los Asperones, Spain', *School Leadership and Management*, 40: 203–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13632434.2019.1699525>
- Herrera-Pastor, D., Padilla-Carmona, M. T., and González-Montegudo, J. (2020b) 'Acompañamiento Sociopedagógico, Holismo Y Longitudinalidad: Claves De Una Buena Práctica Con Un Menor Infractor [Socio-Pedagogical Accompaniment, Holism and Longitudinality: Keys from a Good Practice with a Young Offender]', *Revista Fuentes*, 1: 53–64. <https://doi.org/10.12795/revistafuentes.2020.v22.i1.05>
- Herrera-Pastor, D. et al. (2022) 'Acompañamiento Socioeducativo Y Resiliencia En Jóvenes Migrantes Extutelados: Una Aproximación Desde Las Oportunidades, Los Sueños Y Los Apoyos [Socio-Educational Accompaniment and Resilience in Ex-Protected Young Migrants: An Approach Based on Opportunities, Dreams and Supports]', *Pedagogia Social Revista Interuniversitaria*, 41: 15–28. https://doi.org/10.7179/PSRI_2022.41.01

- Herrera-Pastor, D. et al. (2025) 'The Tyranny of Projects': Experiences and Challenges Faced by Socio-Educational Action Professionals in Spain', *International Social Work*, 68: 909–23. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00208728251319493>
- Hiles, D. et al. (2014) 'So What Am I?' Multiple Perspectives on Young People's Experience of Leaving Care', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 41: 1–15. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2014.03.007>
- Iglesias, E. et al. (2023) 'Participation, Leisure and Social Networks as Key Factors in the Inclusion of Young Unaccompanied Migrants', *Child Indicators Research*, 16: 897–915. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-022-09998-2>
- Law 1. (1998) 'Law 1/1998, De 20 De Abril, De Los Derechos Y La Atención Al Menor [of 20 April, on the Rights and Care of Minors]', *BOE*, 150: 24–06. <https://www.boe.es/eli/es-an/1/1998/04/20/1/con>
- Law 26 (2015) 'De 28 De Julio, De Modificación Del Sistema De Protección A La Infancia y a la Adolescencia [of 28 July, Amending the System for the Protection of Children and Adolescents]', *BOE*, 180: 1–71. <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/1/2015/07/28/26/con>
- Madariaga, J. M. (2014) *Nuevas Miradas Sobre la Resiliencia: ampliando Ámbitos y Miradas [New Perspectives on Resilience: Broadening Horizons and Perspectives.]*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Manciaux, M. (2003) *La Resiliencia: Resistir Y Rehacerse [Resilience: Resisting and Recovering]*. Barcelona: Gedisa.
- Mangone, E., and Masullo, G. (2023) 'The Intermediary Role of Women Workers for the Inclusion of Women Migrants SOGIESC: Between Recognition and Reflexivity', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-023-01062-4>
- Molina-Cuesta, L. (2022) 'Resiliencia y Acompañamiento Socioeducativo. Análisis De Los Procesos De Exclusión E Inclusión En Contextos De Alta Vulnerabilidad Social' [Resilience and Socio-Educational Accompaniment. Analysis of Exclusion and Inclusion Processes in Contexts of High Social Vulnerability]. Doctoral Thesis. Universidad de Málaga.
- Ministerio de Inclusión, Seguridad Social y Migraciones [Ministry of Inclusion, Social Security and Migration] (2025) *Personas Menores No Acompañadas Y Jóvenes Extuteladas, De 16 a 23 Años, Con Autorización De Residencia En Vigor [Unaccompanied Minors and Young People Aged 16 to 23 Who are No Longer in Care, with a Valid Residence Permit]*. Permanent Observatory on Immigration/Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración (OPI). <https://www.inclusion.gob.es/web/opi/estadisticas/catalogo/menores?tab=metodologia>, accessed 6 Jan. 2026.
- United Nations (2005) *Treatment of Unaccompanied and Separated Children Outside Their Country of Origin*. Committee on the Rights of the Child. General Comment no. 6. United Nations. <https://www.refworld.org/legal/general/crc/2005/38046>
- Parry, S., and Weatherhead, S. (2014) 'A Critical Review of Qualitative Research into the Experiences of Young Adults Leaving Foster Care Services', *Journal of Children's Services*, 9: 263–79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JCS-04-2014-0022>
- Ruiz, A. C., Palma, M. O., and Vives, L. C. (2019) 'Jóvenes Inmigrantes Extutelados. El Tránsito A La Vida De Los Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados En El Caso Español [Young Immigrants Leaving Care. The Transition to Adult Life for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors in Spain]', *Ehquidad International Welfare Policies and Social Work Journal*, 12: 31–52. <https://doi.org/10.15257/ehquidad.2019.0009>

- Ruiz-Román, C. Y., and Herrera-Pastor, D. (2020) 'La Investigación de la Resiliencia y el Acompañamiento Socioeducativo: Situación, Limitaciones y Posibilidades Desde la Mirada de la Desventaja Social [Research on Resilience and Socio-Educational Accompaniment: Situation, Limitations and Possibilities from the Perspective of Social Disadvantage]', *Investigación Educativa y Cambio Social [Educational Research and Social Change]*, pp. 211–26. Barcelona: Octaedro.
- Rutter, M. (1987) 'Psychosocial Resilience and Protective Mechanisms', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57: 316–31. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1987.tb03541.x>
- Santana-Vega, L. E., Alonso-Bello, E., and Feliciano-García, L. (2018) 'Trayectorias Laborales y Competencias De Empleabilidad De Jóvenes Nacionales E Inmigrantes En Riesgo De Exclusión Social [Career Paths and Employability Competencies of Young National and Immigrant People at Risk of Social Exclusion]', *Complutense Journal of Education/ Revista Complutense de Educación*, 29: 355–69. <https://doi.org/10.5209/RCED.52444>
- Senovilla, D. (2017) 'Normas y Migraciones: Entre Gestión De La Vulnerabilidad Y Control De La Credibilidad [Regulations and Migrations: Between The Need of Being Qualified as Vulnerable and Selective Credibility Assessments]', *Anduli*, 16: 1–17. <http://dx.doi.org/10.12795/anduli.2017.i16.01>
- Sulimani-Aidan, Y. (2020) 'Social Networks During the Transition to Adulthood from the Perspective of Israeli Care Leavers and Their Social Workers', *Children and Youth Services Review*, 115: 105075. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105075>
- UNESCO (2015) *Rethinking Education: Towards a Global Common Good?* UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54675/MDZL5552>
- Ungar, M. (2015) 'Practitioner Review: Diagnosing Childhood Resilience: A Systemic Approach to the Diagnosis of Adaptation in Adverse Social Ecologies', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 56: 4–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12306>
- Vanistendael, S. (2015) 'El Sentido De Vida En La Construcción De La Resiliencia [The Meaning of Life in Building Resilience]', *Nous. Logotherapy and Existential Analysis Newsletter/Nous Boletín de Logoterapia y Análisis Existencial*, 19: 9–20.
- Werner, E. E., and Smith, R. S. (1982) *Vulnerable but Invincible: A Longitudinal Study of Resilient Children and Youth*. U.S.A.: McGraw-Hill.
- Yates, T. M., and Grey, I. K. (2012) 'Adapting to Aging Out: Profiles of Risk and Resilience Among Emancipated Foster Youth', *Development and Psychopathology*, 24: 475–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0954579412000107>

© The Author(s) 2026. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

British Journal of Social Work, 2026, 00, 1–19

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcag026>

Original Article