Light and shade in the school paths of students from immigrant families

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Abstract

This article analyses the perception of students from immigrant families of the favourable factors which helped them stay in school through the high-risk transition from compulsory secondary education to post-compulsory education. We specifically focus on identifying the individual, academic, family and contextual factors which promoted the persistence, retention and academic success of these young people, bearing in mind the risk factors stemming from their experiences of migration. Lastly, we shed some light on the ways migration has affected their progress in the school system.

Keywords

Introduction

Despite the official policy of inclusion and education for all expressed in public education policies, underachievement and drop-outs are today unsolved problems for most of the European countries (Commission of the European Communities, 2008). And, particulary, there is a steady demand to increase the presence of non-traditional students at the higher stages of our educational systems, what Castells (1996) called years ago the mission of education in the new models of social structure: extending students' education beyond the period of compulsory schooling. This is the case of the children of immigrant families who presents high rates of unemployment and school failure and often greater difficulties to be able to develop positive self-related believes which play a critical role in their ability to learn and tackle the various challenges adults encounter throughout their lives (Stanat & Christensen, 2006). Moreover, research shows that in most countries there are significant differences between the performance of these students and their native peers (PISA, 2018). In Spain disparities between native middle-class students and immigrant students in terms of academic achievement have been happening as follows (Serra & Palaudàries, 2007): i) dropout rates in the last year of high school are much lower for native students than for immigrant students; ii) there are indications that the rate of university attendance is far lower among immigrant-origin students than native students; iii) more immigrant students than native students repeat a grade during their high school

education, or are tracked into "adapted" classes which in most of the cases prevent them from continuing their studies after compulsory secondary education. However, what these trends tell us, often makes invisible that some children manage to do well academically.

In this regard, the completion of compulsory education and post-compulsory education are the gates to other forms of education and training and/or the labour market. They are the most important transitions in life, coinciding with the challenges of adolescence. Young people need to undertake the hazardous process of managing a life project, moulded and constantly influenced by personal, family, educational and contextual factors. They face, in other words, a transition; and all transitions, of whatever type, bring new challenges and require personal adaptations that can become sources of stress (Figuera & Massot, 2013: 270), and which imply ways of learning shaped by the outcome of the process, whose acquired competences can then be transferred to future situations. Achieving this, i.e. staying in the education system and favourably navigating these transitions, depends on three factors: consistency, continuity and gradualness in the educational, family and contextual fields (Sacristán, 1996). The greater the confluence between these fields, the easier it will be to successfully accomplish the transitions.

In the case studied here we talked to young people who also had to grapple with what we have called a *simultaneous transition*: both migratory and educational, meaning that the above-mentioned processes can only be understood in combination with the person's experience of migration (Figuera, Freixa, Massot, Torrado, & Rodríguez, 2006). Both transitions, as they are interrelated and interdependent, should be framed and analysed as processes of continuous evaluation and assimilation.

In this paper we give voice to the young people who, after being tracked for three years (2012-2014), succeeded in completing the high-risk transition from secondary to post-compulsory education and in reaching the second year of the latter stage. Based on their testimony we demonstrate how personal, family, educational and contextual factors were key in successfully making the transition and continuing with the various itineraries offered them by the education system. Their voices are true examples of individuals and families overcoming adversity (Sandín-Esteban & Sánchez-Martí, 2015), knowing that research focused on successful trajectories has been scarcer while a significant number of works have been produced focused on the academic disadvantage of the children of immigrants.

Objective

In the light of the above, this paper aims to identify and address the meaning of the immigrant young people of, firstly, the obstacles and difficulties experienced in their academic careers, particularly relating to migration and its effects in academic terms; and secondly, the protective factors that favoured their staying at school over the high-risk transition from compulsory secondary to post-compulsory education.

Method

Data was collected as a part of a longitudinal case study (I+D+i EDU2011-259601) with a mixed-method design (Teddlie, & Tashakkori, 2006) which aimed to determine to what extent the social and personal networks of immigrant school students may be factors promoting or protecting their school careers. Following this design, the quantitative data was collected and analysed first, while the qualitative was second in sequence, and helped explain and elaborate on the quantitative results obtained in the previews phases. The priority (Creswell, & Plano Clark, 2007) in the study was given to the qualitative approach, because it focused on in-depth explanations of the results obtained in the quantitative phases, and involved extensive data collection from interviews and focus groups. The quantitative and qualitative phases were connected when selecting the participants for qualitative case studies and developing the interview and focus group protocols regarding the results from the previous quantitative phases.

The overall study was carried out in three state high schools from the province of Barcelona offering continuing education alternatives (*Bachillerato*[2] and vocational training[3]). Using incidental non-probabilistic sampling, the initial tracking was made up 87 students in their final year of compulsory secondary school (4th year of ESO) in the 2011-12 school year who were children of immigrant families. 51.1% of them were male

[2] *Bachillerato* is a two year course of non-compulsory secondary education at sixth-form level, intended as preparation for university studies.
[3] The *ciclos de grado medio y grado superior* (translated here as *vocational training*) are shorter courses at the same level, more oriented towards insertion in the labour market.

and 48.8% female. In terms of their places of birth, the three largest groups were: 55.8% Latin America, 20.9% the Maghreb and 15.1% who were already born in Catalonia or other parts of Spain. Of the remaining, 4.7% were from other European countries, 2.3% from Asia, and 1.2% sub-Saharan Africa. In the 2013-14 school year 60 of these 87 students successfully completed the first year of post-compulsory education, and of these 20 moved on to the second year. Of these, 14 managed to complete the year.

Specifically, the analysis presented here comes from the fifth and final phase of the study and is the outcome of individual semi-structured interviews with the 14 young people who managed to reach their final school year. This part of the study, focusing on the crystallization of successful school careers, aims to continue tracking the development of the cohort embarking on their second year of post-compulsory education, registering both the drop-out rate after the first year and the extent to which subjects originally enrolled for were kept up. Apart from recording the percentage of early school leavers, in this phase the study focuses on the crystallization and characterization of the continuing careers of students staying on in the second year. The instrumental longitudinal cases served the purpose of illuminating the particular issue of the persistence of the children of immigrants in high school. The qualitative data collection was audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The analysis was performed using the Atlas.ti 7 qualitative software for data storage, coding, and theme development. Thus, this paper centres on the meanings they attributed to their social networks (Sánchez & Sandín, 2013) in terms of their academic continuity, the events and experiences of academic vulnerability that they had overcome, the identification of resources and assistance received, and the perceived attribution of individual and contextual protecting factors, amongst others.

Results

Migration and its effects on the school career: risk factors

Undoubtedly, undergoing migration conditions and influences the educational process. Figuera, Freixa, Massot, Torrado and Rodríguez (2006) note that the difficulties in this process are especially aggravated in the transition from compulsory to post-compulsory education, since the problems, doubts and anxieties of decision-making are compounded by the troubled transition across cultures and identities stemming from migration. These

authors call this the *simultaneous transition*, as mentioned above. María[4] and Rosa, both born in Ecuador, express their experience of the 'simultaneous transition' in this way:

> *I wanted to do vocational training. But when I got here things got difficult. I had to retake the first year, but then I carried on.* (Woman, 20 years old, Ecuador)

> *When I got here I came up against this problem of the bachillerato. I'd planned to go to university. And so I started bachillerato, obviously, and of course I didn't speak a word of Catalan, so I had to translate all the books all the time. So of course it took me a lot longer.* (Woman, 18, Ecuador)

As their stories confirm, simultaneous transitions influence career development and the attainment of academic and professional objectives among those experiencing migration. The young peoples' difficulties tended to be concentrated in the academic field and were clearly marked by migration (difference in levels, insertion in a new cultural and educational context, mastery of the language, etc.).

Focusing specifically on the differences in cultural contexts and education systems between the countries of origin and the host country, we clearly see disturbances giving rise to situations experienced as "shocks", as moments of confusion and disorientation, despite having a more positive attitude towards school than their peers (PISA, 2006) and higher aspirations (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Rosmery, from Bolivia, says:

> *In Bolivia I got really good marks, it was when I came here that I started having trouble with a lot of subjects. Actually, I had friends who asked me how I was getting on and I was ashamed when I had to tell them I'd failed. I'd never failed anything before. In Bolivia I even skipped a whole year because I had such good marks. […] As I'd never studied here I didn't have any idea, any kind of guide about how you study here. I didn't know anything about vocational studies, or bachillerato, or anything. It was my mother who chose the optional subjects for me, but she didn't know anything either, because in Bolivia everyone does the same subjects. […] If I'd known how it went then I would have chosen subjects like maths, which I like and I'm good at; […] if I'd known that you could choose subjects… I came here with the information my mother had.* (Woman, 21, Bolivia)

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[4] In order to safeguard participants' identities pseudonyms have been used throughout this paper.

Denise, from the Dominican Republic, told us that although she was born in Spain, her parents had decided to send her to their country to spend some of her school years there. Indeed, residential moves are an increasing pattern shown in the construction of successful paths of immigrant students, and at least a factor contributing to learning difficulties and ambivalence, but also to broadening views. This also becomes a problem in the way paths are being supported by schools, expecting all the students will follow linear trajectories. Denise evaluates this oscillation between the Spanish and Dominican systems in this way:

> *Sometimes when I did a year here and then another there it confused me a bit, because each school has its rules and its way of teaching. It was confusing, learning one thing and then coming here and changing schools.* (Woman, 19, Dominican Republic)

Faced with situations of confusion and disorientation stemming from migration-produced culture shock, all the students interviewed stated that they felt they could not take on the challenge of school. All agreed that at these times they had a low opinion of themselves and their abilities. Some illustrations of this are:

> *Maybe if I hadn't got discouraged, I would have stopped thinking, no, I can't do it, I can't do it, then I would have carried on.* (Woman, 19, Dominican Republic)

> *That year was really tough; I got depressed because I was getting really bad marks. I couldn't get anything right.* (Woman, 18, India)

These feelings of lack of self-confidence, insecurity, and low self-esteem were accentuated during the transition between secondary and post-compulsory education, and above all in the first period of the latter, in particular *bachillerato*. Sandra Milena states:

> *Yes, "bachillerato" was really tough, it was just too much for me and I left.* (Woman, 20, Colombia)

María told us that she had a very similar experience:

> *Me too. I left half way through, because I started, but I got really stressed and left. Because I enrolled in a vocational course but they didn't accept me, so I signed on for "bachillerato" so as not waste a year, but I left and lost that year.* (Woman, 20, Ecuador)

Another source of difficulty in their education named by the students was having lived apart from their parents for long periods of their childhood, and in some cases the results of family reunification later. As Massot (2003) notes, migration is a traumatic process which can cause depression in some, with consequences for personal and social identity, and which demands a strenuous effort of adaptation. Rosmery explains that she lived through difficult times on arriving in the host country, and that apart from confusion and insecurity she also felt lonely at that time:

> *Because after 11 years living away from my mother she was like a stranger to me. I wasn't used to living with her. I didn't talk to her much…; I was on my own.* (Woman, 21, Bolivia)

Similarly, Blanca told us:

> *I was depressed for a pretty long time, first because I missed my Mum and Dad, and then also my grandparents.* (Woman, 18, Ecuador)

Lastly, some of the testimonies we gathered commented that economic problems were also an obstacle to their education. In some cases, the parents' financial difficulties meant that the students had to work at the same time as studying, with added costs in terms of time, dedication and concentration; and this also cramped both their planned academic and work careers and their future aspirations. Thus, they explained for example:

> *I had problems in "bachillerato". I hadn't planned to do vocational training, I was planning to do* bachillerato. *But then when I got here I had to work for two years and well, finally last year I decided to go back to school. I had to work.* (Woman, 21, Bolivia)

> *I want to do vocational training. I'm hoping to pass "bachillerato" and then do the vocational training. And when I'm doing it, combine it with working part-time. So I can put some money aside bit by bit.* (Woman, 19, Dominican Republic)

> *I'm hoping to pass this course, get the qualification and start to work. So I can help my family too.* (Woman, 18, India)

Academic persistence and successful transitions. Favourable factors

As against these obstacles, and the confirmation in the literature of a higher general drop-out rate among migrant youth (Mora, 2010), we gathered the favourable factors that helped these young people stay on in education. Firstly, as many scholars indicate (Carrasco, Pàmies, & Bertran, 2008; Suárez-Orozco, Suárez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2009; Palou, 2011), they have high expectations for the future, and this constitutes a crucial reason for staying on at school despite the difficulties they face. In many cases they wish to finish their current courses and then continue their education, combining it with work. If they opt for vocational studies, for example, this alternative seems to give them more self-confidence, as they saw *bachillerato* as very difficult and offering no immediate job prospects. Some even started *bachillerato* provisionally because they could not enrol on the vocational training course of their choice. Sunita expresses it in this way:

> *I'm hoping to pass "bachillerato" and then do the vocational training. And when I'm doing it, combine it with working part-time. So I can put some money aside bit by bit.* (Woman, 18, India).

In some cases, while vocational training was not their ideal course, or their first choice, the features of the school –closeness to home, treatment of students by teachers, the general atmosphere– were decisive in their choice and therefore in the maintenance of their studies.

Having significant actors who provide support or what Sandín and Pavón (2011) call "relational social capital" also contributed to their school careers. Specifically, during a high-risk transition from secondary to post-compulsory education, the participants in this study stressed the support they had received from their families – especially their mothers. A great deal of the students interviewed identified their mothers as a key source of unconditional support in their lives and school careers. Meena expressed it thus:

> *When I left "bachillerato" I was really down, like depressed… and she [her mother] always told me not to worry, that I could do something else, that I was capable of it; that it's important to study because in the end you've got it forever, your qualifications.* (Woman, 18, India)

Moreover, family support was present throughout the school career as one of the main agents that motivated the students, with parents insisting on the importance of studying,

although other research has highlighted that families usually have little capacity to exercise effective school support for their children:

> *There were times when I didn't know whether to carry on and she told me that I should, she encouraged me, she told me that it would be worth it for my future. That I should study so I wouldn't be like her.* (Woman, 20, Ecuador)

> *My Mum, because she always encourages us, and when we arrived here the first thing she did was enrol us so we could carry on studying. And she's always told us that we shouldn't worry about working, that we could study, that she would give us everything we needed. And she did.* (Woman, 19, Colombia)

Friends, mostly from school and the local area, also occupied a key place, and sometimes they mitigate the effects of the loss of some important other social connections. Their support and encouragement was a source of motivation and stimulus in staying at school:

> *She always supported me. She's always been a rock, supporting me in everything, she's always believed in me, she's always believed that I could do whatever I wanted if I put my mind to it, but she's always said to me too that if I didn't want to I wouldn't get anywhere, so I had to believe in it myself.* (Man, 17, Ecuador)

Abdellah, for his part, said:

> *He said that I should stop doing stupid stuff and concentrate more on school stuff, which was what was going to be useful to me in life; because sometimes you have a laugh and all that for a while, but you don't always have that.* (Man, 17, Morocco)

In some cases, they also talked of their friends as models or mentors. The possibilities of such figures have been discussed in the literature as important for promoting academic and school engagement, and also for facilitating social integration (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003):

> *Sometimes things happen suddenly and you're not prepared for them. I don't have like a clear idea of what I'm going to do. But maybe now I'm surer of where I'm going... I'd like to do 3D animation, and it's because now I've got people round me who are like telling me to carry on, that it's worth studying, and that I should work in what I want. [...] Raquel, Jill and Libertad.* (Woman, 18, Ecuador)

Malika, for her part, describes it in these terms:

> *It's like they when they sit down they sit down in a group, right? And I always sit on my own, so I don't know... because I saw that they were good students, so I said, it'll be better if I get into their group because then I'll have more friends. [They give me] friendship, company... everything. [Also] it's like we compete with each other, you know? (laughs) to see who can get the best marks in exams (laughs).* (Woman, 18, Morocco).

Turning to the schools themselves, the young people stress the climate of trust between teachers and students. This becomes a favourable factor in their continuing their studies, since they feel better supported, recognized, etc. They particularly mention the school head or director, the director of studies and their tutors as key figures in their school careers. According to the testimonies we gathered, these members of staff motivated them not to give up when faced with problems, to develop greater self-confidence, and above all to find accessible ways of staying in the educational system. María Gabriela emphasises her tutor's role:

> *I talked to my tutor a lot; she really helped me. She always gave me good advice […] she told us that in ESO she had really got to know us and that's why we should stay at school and keep on studying. A lot of us left, but I paid attention to what she said.* (Woman, 19, Venezuela)

For Patricia on the other hand, one of her mainstays was the head of studies:

> *The head of studies was always there for us. She encouraged us. My course tutor sometimes asked me a question in passing. Sometimes we had tutorials, but the head of studies, Laura, was always there. Giving us advice, helping us…* (Woman, 19, Bolivia)

In terms of the facilities and resources available to meet these students' needs, the reception class appears as one of the means which most favoured their integration in the school, their language learning, and their development of the skills needed to deal with the host country's academic demands. Meena and Douae told us:

> *I went to the reception class. There I learnt Catalan and then Spanish. The teacher really helped me.* (Woman, 18, India)

I went too in the first year, and she helped me a lot as well because I didn't know a lot of people here and at the beginning to answer, like, five questions I had to translate a lot and it was really tough. (Woman, 19, Morocco)

Others also stressed the support received in other education centres, as in the case of Denise:

When I was in ESO I went to a centre called İtaca, and there they helped me a lot. When I started bachillerato [the monitor in the centre] was really happy. They helped me, but I wasn't into it, so I left. But now they're still helping me. They're encouraging me, telling me I can do things, why don't I do this or that… (Woman, 18, Dominican Republic).

In the difficult circumstances these students had to face, we observed that their families, friends and education centres all motivated them to continue studying; however, we should not leave aside personal factors and other local facilities available to assist and accompany them. As Figuera and Massot (2013: 272) note, the evaluation that the person makes of the process, that is, their interpretation of whether their previous assumptions are confirmed or not –their expectations of self-efficacy– becomes a source of information for coming challenges, for future transitions. Thus, personal factors, expectations of self-efficacy resulting from proven resilience, and favourable events in their surroundings that nourish the ability to respond to challenges all promote and condition success. In the following quotations, students explain the decisive influence of these factors:

Study more. Study more, get good marks so I can prepare for uni, because I don't want to get stuck in the rut of doing one course and then another, but I want to do a two-year course and then go for uni. And… well, reach my goal and make my mother proud of me. (Woman, 18, Morocco)

My family [supported me] much more strongly, and my friends as well but not so much, because I suppose everyone will go their own way… […] but they helped me carry on at school because obviously they thought I could better myself and get ahead at school. (Woman, 17, Ecuador)

I come from a pretty broken home… I mean all my cousins of my age are either pregnant or already have kids… and I'm the only one who still doesn't have a

baby. So my grandmother expects me to do a degree, to study something, and not to have a kid yet. [...] She wants me to be something better... [...] and she's right, that's why I'm here. I have to get to be something and be her biggest pride because she brought me up since I was little. (Woman, 17, Peru)

The economy and how the country's going and everything... it's really expensive to enrol and so on and... and in my country it's much cheaper and all, and I've already said that I want to get ahead, I'm not going to get stuck with just second year of bachillerato*, so at least I'll try to go to uni over there. [...] I'll miss everything, because I've been here since I was five, so that's 13 years living here. I'm more from here than from there, but well, to be something in life, if you haven't got qualifications you're nothing. (Man, 17, Ecuador)*

I can see myself finishing studying and then I'll work, looking after my family. I'll be happy because now my family helps me and after I'll be able to help my family. (Woman, 19, India)

Conclusions

The testimony of these young people enabled us to identify what they saw as the key factors in their education, along with those that they considered had helped and/or hindered their persistence in school. From this we were able to shed some light on ways that immigrant students deal with their simultaneous transitions in secondary school. As Borrero said (2011), students' quotes have the power to show that there are youth succeeding in public schools, heading off to college, and taking pride in their achievements; and such successes need to become more a part of the discourse of student achievement.

In terms of risk factors, students unanimously agreed that their "immigrant condition" influences their education, creating a series of added obstacles over and above strictly academic problems. Amongst these impediments they particularly mentioned the consequences of the simultaneous transition, in that they experienced confusion, disorientation, insecurity and low self-esteem, amongst others (Pásztor, 2010). Moreover, they added the consequences of having lived part of their childhood apart from their parents and, in some cases, problems resulting from family reunification in adolescence or young adulthood (Suárez-Orozco, Bang, & Kim, 2011). Finally, they pointed out their

family economic difficulties, which meant that they had to combine studying and working, and conditioned their academic and professional careers, in addition to their aspirations for the future.

Despite these hurdles, some managed to stay in the education system and complete their studies. One of the favourable factors which, according to our findings, enabled them to succeed at school was overcoming the difficulties of migration and educational paths, with support from their families (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003), peers (Ream & Rumberger, 2008) and socio-educational agents (Gibson, Gándara, & Koyama, 2004; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2003). Similarly, students highlighted that family models (especially the mother) motivated them and insisted on the importance of education in developing a career and a life. In this sense, the fact that their families and teachers understood them and helped them was essential to get over the difficulties involved in the simultaneous transitions which all students of migrant origins face. Furthermore, another factor was showing resilience and the students' ability to tackle adversity (Sandín-Esteban & Sánchez-Martí, 2015; Ungar, 2008). And lastly, belonging to a school working jointly with community institutions appeared to provide a comprehensive response to students' needs (Epstein, 2011). However, literature on immigration and education also shows young people have very different opportunities in school, and confirms how the structure and school culture acquire forms and meanings that make explicit the diverse possibilities of success of these young people.

Although fostering academic achievement and addressing trajectories of immigrant students goes beyond school, we would stress, the importance of communication, coordination and joint work between the various actors and contexts involved in students' lives, termed by Sacristán (1996) *coherence*. Participation and working in networks stand as key factors in boosting academic success, and would help reduce the percentage (currently 15%) of foreign non-EU youth between 18 and 24 defined by Marí-Klose (2009) as youth without the compulsory secondary education diploma and not in education or training, and who are thus socially excluded, in that they suffer a systematic reduction of life chances.

For their part, through the putting in place of various support facilities –pedagogic, emotional, instrumental and/or economic– schools can also promote student retention and successful academic transitions. However, their effectiveness depends not as much on the

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number of resources at their disposal for responding to diversity, but more on in-school and between-schools coordination of all the resources available to offer students suitable solutions.

Underlying all the factors that we have noted above is the school's own concept of integration, in which affective ties and trust with teachers take on a special importance. Through the relationship with the teacher we can achieve an in-depth knowledge of the challenges faced by students, and this can enable us to provide responses which are better adjusted to their needs.

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