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## **PATHS OF INCLUSION: MUTUAL AID AND RECONSTRUCTION OF YOUTH IDENTITIES**

*Caminos de inclusión: Ayuda mutua y reconstrucción de identidades juveniles*

Xus MARTÍN GARCÍA  
*Universitat de Barcelona. España.*  
*xusmartin@ub.edu*  
*<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4404-1026>*

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### ABSTRACT

The situation of young people living at risk of social exclusion becomes more complicated when they leave the socio-educational institutions they have been a part of during their childhood and adolescence. The majority lack emotional and financial support from their parents, finding themselves in circumstances marked by loneliness and a sense of abandonment. Recognizing this reality, the qualitative research presented in this article focuses on designing a proposal that allows for the reconstruction and strengthening of the relationships of these young individuals in three dimensions: the relationship with oneself, relationships with peers, and relationships with adults.

The hypothesis is based on the implementation and activation of three pedagogical dynamics – mutual aid, self-awareness strategies, and mentoring processes by adults – which foster the inclusion of these youths in the community, the reconstruction of identity, and the design of normalized life projects away from marginalization.

Over twenty months, fieldwork was conducted with a group consisting of nine boys and two girls between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one. Forty-three sessions and eight individual tutorials were carried out. The analysis of the information has highlighted the formative impact of the experience. The results point to progress in the emergence of cooperative behaviours, reconciliation with the past, the creation of future projects away from marginalization, interest in academic learning, and the development of social awareness.

*Keywords:* self-concept; unqualified young people; peer group; life story; tutorial.

## RESUMEN

La situación de los chicos y chicas que viven en riesgo de exclusión social se complica cuando abandonan las instituciones socioeducativas de las que han formado parte durante su infancia y adolescencia. La mayoría no cuenta con el soporte emocional ni económico de sus progenitores, y se encuentra en una situación marcada por la soledad y la sensación de desamparo. Reconociendo esta realidad, la investigación cualitativa que se presenta en este artículo se ha orientado a diseñar una propuesta que permita reconstruir y afianzar la relación de estas y estos jóvenes atendiendo a tres dimensiones: la relación con uno mismo, la relación con los iguales, y la relación con los adultos.

Se parte de la hipótesis que la puesta en práctica y activación de tres dinámicas pedagógicas –ayuda mutua, estrategias de autoconocimiento y procesos de acompañamiento por parte de un adulto– favorece en los jóvenes, la inclusión en la comunidad, la reconstrucción de la identidad y el diseño de proyectos vitales normalizados alejados de la marginación.

Durante veinte meses se ha realizado un trabajo de campo en un grupo formado por nueve chicos y dos chicas de edades comprendidas entre los diecisiete y los veintún años. Se han llevado a cabo cuarenta y tres sesiones y ocho tutorías individuales. El análisis de la información ha permitido poner de manifiesto el impacto formativo de la experiencia. Los resultados apuntan a progresos en la aparición de conductas cooperativas, la reconciliación con el pasado, la creación de proyectos de futuro alejados de la marginalidad, el interés por la formación académica y el desarrollo de la conciencia social.

*Palabras clave:* concepto de sí mismo; jóvenes sin cualificación; grupo de iguales; historias de vida; tutoría.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The situation of abandonment experienced by youths in disadvantaged environments is widely recognized. Sociology, pedagogy and psychology studies (Calderón, 2016; Martín, 2018; Melendro, 2023; Tarabini and Jacovkis, 2019), as well as contributions found in the literature (Domingo, 2022; El Hachmid, 2022; Louis, 2019; Whitehead, 2020), coincide in noting the stigma felt by this population sector and the issues facing it. This group has grown up under the wing of social institutions entrusted with protecting and accompanying the most fragile children as a result of the vulnerable situation to which their families are subjected.

The issues faced by these young people gradually become invisible, leading to a progressive process of neglect, as they get older. Resources become reduced when they leave the compulsory school system and continue to drop drastically when they reach legal age, at which time the authorities and society in general more or less explicitly assume that this population group no longer needs the support and protection they have benefited from up to that time (Melendro, 2023).

The processes of those who grow up 'on the fringes' are diverse, taking them down different paths. Some people, falling victim to their situation, join the circuits established by social services to address specific issues, such as dependence, poverty, drugs, difficulties supporting themselves financially or early pregnancy, to name a few. Others, however, through great effort and a bit of luck, have overcome the situation of extreme marginalization towards which they seemed irremissibly bound. And despite the fact that they continue to live in neighbourhoods crippled by poverty and unemployment rates well above average, they are in a position to keep moving forward and to join a society from which they have felt systematically excluded.

The contribution in this paper sets its sights on this latter group of youths: those with a strong yearning to succeed, despite having led difficult lives. However, in spite of the apparently stable situation, their reality is fragile and marked by uncertainty, lack of control, certain mental health issues, family conflict, illegal residence in the country, consumption of illegal substances and the proximity to marginal communities. These are young men and women who recently broke their formal ties with social and educational institutions and have a sense of 'walking alone in the dark toward the future', as one of them put it. Most of them receive no emotional or financial support from their parents, either because they are alone in the country or because the family ties have broken down, the parent they live with is in delicate health conditions or for other reasons.

In terms of daily activities, there are some who join the job market in precarious conditions, some who do so because of their irregular status, and some who continue to learn, taking specialized courses without having a very clear idea of how useful they will be. The overall feeling is a strong sense of uncertainty.

In the face of these situations, individual efforts are almost never enough to overcome the personal, and also social, obstacles, in which stereotypes, poverty, racism and lack of opportunities, to name a few, weigh heavily. It is essential to design educational proposals that accompany the transition to a normalized adult life for these youths, focused on counteracting or minimizing the profound sense of loneliness that pervades their lives.

This research aims to contribute in this regard, proposing an educational experience based on three pedagogical dynamics: first, mutual aid, second, self-awareness strategies and third, mentoring processes by an adult.

The hypothesis is based on the implementation and activation of three pedagogical dynamics – mutual aid relationships, self-awareness strategies, and adult mentoring processes – that foster inclusion in the community, the reconstruction of identity, and the design of normalized life projects away from marginalization amongst young people living in situations of marginalization.

The following sections will be devoted to describing each of these elements.

## **2. MUTUAL AID**

Peer cooperation is acknowledged to be a key factor in explaining the evolution of humanity. Cooperative aid behaviour is essential not only for personal well-being but it is also part of human nature. As Tomasello (2010) notes, subjects are naturally predisposed to altruistic activities, which they exhibit from a very early age. One of the main conditions that promote mutual aid is the sense of belonging to a group in which one becomes committed to common goals.

The sample of individuals in this research has had life experiences marked either by a nomadic lifestyle in which changes of residence (and sometimes country) have been a constant, or by belonging to communities with strong identities leading to the creation of ghetto-like neighbourhoods. In this latter case, the inclusion processes pose a dilemma to the boy or girl. Does progressing towards a normalized life involve abandoning the setting in which the child grew up?

The mechanism implemented in this research to promote aid and altruism is the peer group. Removed from the environment of exclusion, the group aims to generate positive relationships between young people in similar situations (Ferreira, Magalhães and Prioste, 2020). To create them, Mutual Aid Groups (MAG) were taken as a reference. These groups are organizations in which the members voluntarily meet, moved by the need to find a solution to a shared problem which each individual has become aware of and wishes to overcome by exchanging information and through mutual cooperation (Raggio and Soukoyan, 2007, pp. 27-29; Gutiérrez, 2012).

Three elements were adopted from the MAG. The first involves understanding the social component contained in individual problems. The group provides the

conditions for the interaction with others to be highly positive and to facilitate personal recovery processes. The second is identifying common situations. Sharing the same problem fosters an emotional connection that is created when a person sees themselves reflected in another's circumstances. And thirdly, simultaneously taking on the role of protector and protected in the group. When a person shares their own vulnerability and feels that others include them in their affliction, they are predisposed to perceive the group as a safe setting.

### 3. SELF-AWARENESS STRATEGIES

Reflective practice and behavioural regulation are habits that are not well developed in the young people participating in the research. This limitation hinders them when they are faced with decisions, they feel are important in their lives (relating to their education, partners or jobs, for example), for which they do not feel prepared. They admit that some of the behaviour that has generated problems for them (such as fights, theft, drug use or certain sexual relations) was rarely the result of a free decision on their part but rather, they were influenced by the circumstances and group pressure (Calderón, 2016; Jacovkis, Prieto and Rujas, 2022; Martín and López-Dóriga, 2022). They are aware of the fact that moving in marginal environments creates a proximity to situations of risk that other young people do not experience; they are unable to detect these situations at the time, leading to conflicts that perhaps could have been avoided had they reflected on them beforehand.

By developing self-awareness, it is possible to regulate one's behaviour and accelerate the process of autonomy and projection into the future, distancing them from the *excluded* status that many boys and girls identify with and that they believe they cannot rid themselves of. One of the strategies activated in this research to promote processes of reflection, self-observation and introspection is Personal Digital Storytelling (hereinafter, PDS), a resource that has developed in recent decades thanks to technological progress.

PDS consists of creating brief personal stories lasting three to four minutes. They are narrated in first person using audio-visual techniques, entail a strong degree of involvement by the person creating them and are constructed with support from specialised staff (Rodríguez Illera, Martínez and Galván, 2019, p. 3).

PDS is used in research as an instrument that facilitates self-awareness processes for two reasons. The first is the rejection of writing activities shown by these youths, a further expression of the detachment from school settings developed over the years. And secondly, the interest in finding methodologies that do not involve writing but facilitate access to undeveloped spaces of consciousness and offer an opportunity to systematically think about oneself (Martín and Martínez, 2020). PDS is seen as an alternative to autobiography because it retains the narrative format but moves away from the exercise of writing and connects to forms of expression and communication

that are relatable and attractive to young people, allowing them to examine part of their experience (Bertaux, 2005, p. 36). The inclusion of images, music and the use of social media and mobile phones fosters their engagement in the project (Gardner and Davis, 2014), giving them greater autonomy in their own storytelling.

#### 4. MENTORING PROCESSES

The life experience of a young person growing up in a context of exclusion is defined more by mourning and break-ups than by emotional ties (Louis, 2021). Some of the most striking effects of this include an attitude of resistance to personal ties, especially with adults, and a diminished self-concept, marked by the role of “not being able to” (Goffman, 2006; Melazzini, 2022).

Reversing this situation requires, among other elements, the presence of adult role models that help heal the wounds of the past through proximity and respect. Mentoring and acknowledging are inseparable tasks geared towards modifying the mindset of underestimation and enabling the construction of a positive self-concept. Mentoring has to do with generating personal ties that convey safety and trust to young people and allow them to share their fears and uncertainties. Acknowledging requires an educational perspective that values personal achievements and prioritizes strengths over weaknesses (Ruiz-Román and Herrera, 2020). Both tasks lead to actions, practices, routines and relationship styles.

While it is impossible to list all the actions used by the adult in the research to establish a close relationship with each member of the group and to acknowledge their abilities, the most significant ones, given their educational intentions, are described here: group sessions, individual tutorials, a *WhatsApp* group, presentation of the experience at the university and creation of the PDS script.

The group sessions lie at the core of the learning experience. Weekly sessions promote communication and mutual understanding, conditions that are necessary to encourage the youths to express themselves spontaneously, share their concerns and be open to discussing delicate topics.

Individual tutorials are personal meetings between the adult and one young person. In the early phases, they take place spontaneously at the end of the group meeting. Later, they are held outside the centre, at the initiative of the adult or the youth, specifically taking the shape of going for a snack, taking a walk or visiting the adult's workplace.

The *WhatsApp* group was an initiative by the research team aimed at sharing information. However, it quickly became an instrument of intense communication between the young men and women. The communication was at once free-flowing and irregular.

The group's presentation of the experience in a university master's course had recognition effects that went beyond the team's expectations.

The creation of the PDS script encouraged extra communication between the adult and each youth. While the aid from peers is evident, personal efforts promote a unique system of individual tutorials.

## 5. AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, the research entails a hypothesis stating that the implementation and activation of three pedagogical dynamics – mutual aid, self-awareness strategies, and mentoring processes by adults – fosters the inclusion in the community, the reconstruction of identity, and the design of normalized life projects amongst young people living in situations of marginalization.

To validate or refute the hypothesis, two aims were formulated to guide the research and focus its results.

1. To design and apply a learning experience in which three pedagogical dynamics – mutual aid, self-awareness strategies, and mentoring processes by adults – are activated and to verify their feasibility. The intention is to detect successes and errors of the experience in a specific context.
2. To analyse the learning impact of the experience on the group of young people, as well as its pedagogical value, in an effort to understand the extent to which it helps promote processes of inclusion in the community, reconstruction of identity, and the design of projects for the future.

To achieve the proposed aims, a qualitative methodological approach was chosen. Specifically, this research can be classified as participatory action research (PAR), given its transformative intentions and the interest in understanding and optimizing a specific context. (Díez-Gutiérrez, 2020; Francés, 2016).

The study arose at the request of a working group composed of social instructors concerned about the lack of support and mentoring experienced by young men and women when they reach the age limit and must leave social and educational institutions.

The project researcher, two instructors from the Saó Prat school (El Prat de Llobregat) and one instructor from the Esclat Bellvitge social and educational centre (L'Hospitalet de Llobregat) were involved in the *proposal design*. The decision was made to launch a learning group aimed at youths in vulnerable situations who had recently left the institutions where they were educated. The group would meet weekly in the IT room at the Saó Prat school.

The *field work* took place over a period of twenty months and focused on implementing and monitoring the group of young people. Nine boys and two girls (three of which joined the group at the beginning of the second year) participated, ranging from the age of seventeen to twenty-one. Of the nine boys in the group,

three are Arabs and four are Spanish, two of which are Gypsies and one non-Gypsy, while the fourth was born in Spain to Moroccan parents. One of the girls is from Santo Domingo and the other is Spanish. The coordinating team is composed of three adults: the researcher in charge of leading the sessions, one instructor from the Saó Prat school, in charge of infrastructure and IT material, and a communications technician, who provided the learning needed for construction of the PDS. A film student joined the sessions for the purpose of recording the meetings on video. Forty-three sessions – thirty-eight of which are video-recorded – and eight individual tutorials took place.

Over the twenty months of field work, the researcher kept a field journal, recording in detail information about the group dynamics and the process experienced by the young people. Thanks to the video recordings, observations could be added to the journal after the meetings. By having a chance to view the group meetings afterwards, it was possible to make a comprehensive analysis of the diverse elements present in the intervention.

For the final stage, consisting of *analysis of the information and drafting the results*, three assessment sessions were held with all the group participants, two sessions of the coordinating team and two meetings with the group of educators that proposed the research. Next, the researcher drew up the results in light of the proposed aims, using a thematic analysis process (Braun and Clarke, 2006) without the digital versions of the material gathered from the different sources of information – interviews, messages in the *WhatsApp* group, video recordings of the sessions and the field journal. These findings are outlined below.

One and a half years after finishing the experience, taking advantage of the fact that one of the young men had recently become a father, a meeting took place aimed at sharing the personal situations of the group members and returning the results obtained in the research. Prior to this, the results had been reported to the team that participated in the experience and to the working group that had suggested the study.

## 6. RESULTS OF APPLICATION OF THE PEDAGOGICAL DEVICE

The first aim consisted in designing and applying a learning experience and verifying its feasibility, which took a period of twenty months and is broken down here into three stages.

### 6.1. *Stage one. From creation to consolidation of the group*

*At the beginning of the experience, the pedagogical conditions for conveying safety to the youths were created, fostering relationships of trust, which are essential to developing a sense of belonging to the group.*



During the first four months, the coordinating team took the initiative at the sessions. Entertaining activities and exercises were introduced with a view to promoting self-awareness and mutual understanding. Through listening, jokes and dialogue, the message was conveyed to the youths that they were in a place where they were valued and not judged.

The adults' intervention was geared more towards raising questions than expressing opinions. These questions were intended to make them reflect, to raise doubts about undeveloped reasoning, to confirm an opinion, to propose a scenario they had not considered or to help one of the youths take part. Gradually, the boys and girls began to introduce the topics to be addressed themselves.

This stage ends with an introspective activity in which four elements were addressed: an important event in their lives, a painful experience, someone they were glad to have met and one free element (which most of them used to express painful events). Although the young people were not encouraged to express their reflections openly, they insisted on sharing them.

In the assessment session, the group members highlighted how they were listened to respectfully and the ability to talk 'about everything'. They admitted to having shared experiences they had not discussed before, expressed surprise at realizing how simple and toxic their previous relationships were, and satisfied in knowing they could trust their fellow group members.

<b>Phase 1</b>	<b>Successes</b>	<b>Proposals for improvement</b>
Mutual aid and MAG	Creation of a happy, respectful environment. Introduction of two elements that foster ties: the snack and the group selfie.	
Self-awareness and PDS	Personal survey about own identity. Diverse dynamics in addressing topics.	Advisable to introduce exercises geared towards the PDS in this first phase
Mentoring processes	Positive, relatable attitude. Adapting to the group members' ways of communicating Not criticizing mistakes.	Seek ways to bolster the participation of less communicative youths.

## 6.2. Stage two. From trust to cooperation

*The relationships of trust between the participants evolved towards attitudes of collaboration and mutual aid. The self-awareness processes were enhanced through the creation of the PDS and the situation of vulnerability endured by the young people was put in the spotlight.*

Personal commitment to the group was strengthened: the number of proposed topics grew, and the involvement in preparing the sessions and punctuality increased. Personally concerning experiences were shared and initiatives to meet outside the sessions arose.

The introduction of the PDS altered the weekly dynamics. Thinking about and choosing topics, viewing celebrity stories, preparing scripts, searching for images, recording video and audio, as well as editing, are skills that require time and dedication. Differences in technological skills within the group fostered peer cooperation. The adult mentoring also gained momentum, offering support in writing scripts, which is an exercise that calls for intense processes of reflecting on the past.

During the sessions, the group members shared their progress, offered ideas and supported the development of each PDS. The topics addressed include bullying, overcoming drug use, loneliness, stages of growth, friendships and family relations. Rap, photographs, video, music, interviews and first-person narration are the resources combined to create a variety of stories.

The stage ends with the viewing of the PDS and an assessment session in which the young people acknowledge the group as a stable support mechanism at difficult times in their lives. The survey they each filled out on their own at the start of the course was returned to them and they were surprised to note that they were overcoming many of the challenges they had mentioned.

<b>Phase 2</b>	<b>Successes</b>	<b>Proposals for improvement</b>
Mutual aid and MAG	Time devoted to discussing personal experiences offered by the youths. Intense activity in the WhatsApp group.	Link the group members' experiences to possible PDS themes.
Self-awareness and PDS	Exercises organized in keeping with the PDS script. Technology skills learning. Creation of the PDS	Greater control over the time devoted to creating the PDS.
Mentoring processes	Attitude of availability also outside of meetings. Strengthening the personal relationship with each young person.	

### 6.3. Phase three. From personal matters to social concerns

*The inclusion of social issues, a greater degree of self-organization and an interest in education characterize the last stage in which the researcher took part.*

While personal matters were still discussed –especially romantic relationships and job searches– other topics of a social nature were introduced. The young people displayed an openness to discussing topics that they had considered irrelevant

months earlier, like the environment, politics, respect for animals or gender equality. There was a striking interest in education aimed at engaging in activities they found rewarding. They also began to contact neighbourhood recreational, sport, academic and art institutions, depending on their individual interests.

Three new youths joined the group, one of whom displayed an attitude that was not very constructive. He had trouble listening and ridiculed certain opinions; this behaviour contrasted with the assertive conduct of the others, who made an effort to help him regulate his remarks. The activity in the *WhatsApp* group increased and personal meetings took place at weekends.

This stage ended with the group presenting their experience in a university master's course. To prepare, the young people had to create content about what they instinctively knew and, during the presentation, they had to answer the questions asked. The success of their presentation helped them feel more secure about themselves and the group.

In the group evaluation sessions and the individual interviews, there was widespread gratitude for having created the group, which continued without the researcher's involvement from that time on.

Phase 3	Successes	Proposals for improvement
Mutual aid and MAG	Greater level of self-organization Acceptance of new members.	Delegate the preparation of certain activities to the members most engaged in the group.
Self-awareness and PDS	Introducing social issues. Facilitating contact with nearby institutions.	
Mentoring processes	Acknowledging the personal achievements and contributions to the group.	Balance out the attention paid to the more experienced members and the newcomers.

## 7. RESULTS OF THE LEARNING IMPACT ON THE YOUNG PEOPLE

The second aim consisted in analysing the pedagogical value and learning impact of the experience. The findings presented here show the changes detected in the lives of the young people over the twenty months of research. While they cannot be attributed exclusively to their participation in the group, there is a link between these elements. The achievement of certain changes seen in their way of thinking and acting was influenced by the experience.

Given how difficult it would be to list all the micro-accomplishments and gains made on an individual and group level, they have been broken down into four categories here: reconciliation with the past, future projects away from marginalization, interest in academic learning and development of social awareness. Some

of this progress clearly has a strong social and civic aspect while in other areas it is limited to the personal dimension.

### 7.1. *Reconciliation with the past*

Managing anger and rage pent up over the years, accepting adverse circumstances of the past, putting unnamed experiences into words and forgiving mistakes are some of the slow, painstaking accomplishments that the boys and girls achieved as the project progressed. Each participant in the group confronted their life history and acknowledged behaviour they are ashamed of, but which is a part of them and has had a profound impact on them.

I was really sexist with my girlfriend. I was afraid that, since I saw myself as less, I didn't deserve her. She could look for someone else who was good for her. Then I was afraid she might actually meet someone better than me and would go off with him. So I kept tabs on her all the time. The truth is, I was really a bastard. (subject 1)

Looking back and within places the young people in situations of suffering that they could not cope with in the past. When they reflect on these situations, they become aware of how they have affected their lives. Recognizing and accepting the part of oneself that makes one suffer was a tough but also liberating experience because it enabled them to distance themselves from the role of victim and to shed the unpleasant guilty feelings that overcome them.

The experiences shared by these young people include gender-based violence in the family, being abandoned by the father as a child, fear of situations that cut life short and lead to a sense of fragility, the need to hide one's fears so that friends will not use them against one, bullying at a young age, acting as a bully as an adolescent, the insecurity of feeling like the 'dummy' of the class, substance abuse, incomprehension felt in response to a minority sexual orientation, ties to gangs and sexist attitudes towards a partner.

The group offered a space in which it was possible for each participant to open up and rearrange the past, feeling accepted by peers with similar experiences.

I've explained stuff in the group that I'd never explained to anyone, you know? Things that I'm ashamed of about my family or my crises, you know. I know they listen to me here and no one laughs at me and if I cry no one is going to make fun of me or talk about it out there. To me, that's trust. (Subject 2).

### 7.2. *Future projects away from marginalization*

Activating the ability to guide their own lives and to confront the future is one of the most substantial modifications that these young people achieved in their

way of thinking and behaving. To do this they had to fight internalized beliefs that condemn them from the outset to projects leading to exclusion. But above all they had to let go of limiting habits and settings that prevented them from growing and developing their personality.

I'm in much better shape since I quit (smoking joints). I was really hooked. I lived to smoke. And the idea of quitting had been in my head for a while. But it wasn't easy. Shit, I don't know how to explain it. I went back to football and did well. I stayed with my friends for a while, but in the end I left them. So now I work and do other things in the evenings. Sport, when I can. I come here. Make better use of my time. But, yeah, I'm better. I wasn't really there before. I was just wasting time. Now I'm here and doing well. (Subject 3)

The low expectations with regard to the future that they perceived in their families and at school have prompted these young people to normalize the situation of exclusion in which they live. In the first phase of the project, most of them had accepted, without resistance, life projects in line with the paths their parents had taken. Just one imagined an alternative future, completely disconnected from reality.

Through critical reflection processes, each youth progressed in the awareness of their possibilities and considered acceptable goals to optimize their quality of life. Getting a driving licence, passing entrance exams to continue studying, participating as a leader of recreational groups, looking for a job, keeping it, handling conflicts with their partner through dialogue and becoming independent from their families are small accomplishments that boosted each participant's confidence.

Improved self-esteem is closely related to the discovery made by each young person that their projects have yet to be constructed, and that this is a task they must feel responsible for.

While I was making my story I wondered whether self-esteem has to do with your social class. Now I don't think it does, I think self-esteem is more about your decisions. About what you decide and do. Self-esteem is about you and your experience. Not whether you are poor. This affects you by making you think others are better than you. But that's not true. And I'll end with this phrase that I like: there's only one person who can change your life. And that's you. (Subject 4)

### 7.3. *Interest in academic learning*

The interest in learning, academic education and specialized training gained momentum as the project progressed. This interest had experienced constant gains and setbacks as a result of the uncertainty that the subject of "studying" generated in the boys and girls.

The dream of advancing was repeatedly hindered by fear of a new disappointment, by the suspicion of 'not being able to' and by a lack of knowledge about the steps to be taken.

Subject 4: I wanted to get a diploma.

Subject 2: In your field?

S4. Yes. Well, for x-rays or lab technician. I'd like that.

Adult. So you're going for an advanced diploma...

S4. If I don't change my mind, because I might change...

A. If you've wanted to do this for two years, why would you change?

S4. Well, because I have a lot of stuff in my head. You know what's really the matter?

I'm actually really insecure about decisions. I don't say, 'I'm going to do this' and do it.

No. I say 'I'm going to do this' and I need a thousand opinions. And, well, whatever.

S2. Well, do it, if that's what you want to do. It's worth it. You'll have training. And anyway, you like it, right?

S4. The thing is, I don't do what I really like because instead of having balls, I go on Instagram (...) Besides, I'm a real idiot...I might start then have to drop out.

While the young people showed indifference, if not outright contempt, for all things academic in the early sessions, including the secondary school certificate, which most of them had not earned, this attitude evolved into concern as they gradually acknowledged the discomfort they felt by their lack of education.

They share the belief that academic advancement will help them get better paid jobs and greater job stability, although improved financial status is not the only reason they support continuing to study. They also value personal fulfilment. Being open to returning to school poses a question for them: what they would like to do. While some respond by starting registration processes, others find excuses not to do so. Fear of failure is sometimes greater than the desire to learn.

Over the twenty months of research, significant progress was seen in the participants' academic learning: IT and languages hold important positions, as do entrance exams for diverse courses, as well as training to work as recreational instructors. In addition, one girl registered for a social integration course and one boy registered for an advanced diploma in transport and logistics.

#### 7.4. *Development of critical social awareness*

The evolution seen in the members of the group from a state of individual awareness to a state of critical awareness committed to the environment was a slow process that sped up in the final phases.

At the start of the project, the youths' engagement was weak when it came to addressing macro-ethics. They were either explicitly uninterested or they mirrored opinions heard in their immediate surroundings without any objections: 'My mum says not to vote for those deadbeat bums who want to take our grants away', 'the

thing is that the feminists want to be better than men, and that's no good either'. In general, the culture of silence about social issues seems to be predominant in their communication styles. Just one young woman admitted to having discussed feminism and politics in a family environment.

Certain events, like the feminist marches on the eighth of March or the announcement of elections, offer an opportunity to discuss them in the group. While the youths have the courage to speak their opinions, they have serious difficulties in coming up with arguments to defend their stances. Their contributions are naive and revolve around dissatisfaction, without offering possibilities for improvement or considering actions that could change the issues raised. Not until halfway through the project do they overcome the attitude of constant accusation to see themselves as potential agents of change.

Overuse of plastic, the right to vote in elections, the risks of wasteful consumption, consequences of climate change, the wage gap between men and women, and vulnerability of migrants are some of the topics that sparked debate and encouraged the youths to consider how they might be responsible.

I went to the fair and there was no purple post for women to go to if they are assaulted. And that gay man whose nose was broken. I mean, why don't we demand these things? Why do we remain silent? Subject2

Well, this time I'm going to vote. Since it's my right to vote, I'm going to. Subject5

I signed up with a party from Prat. It's new. The point is to participate. Adults don't live in the same world as I do. I mean, I know a lot of things that happen to me first-hand here, because of my age. Since political parties are usually full of older people... I'm going there and telling them 'we need this or that'. Subject2

Critical awareness opens young people's minds and hearts to issues that transcend them while enabling them to identify as members of something larger than the small community they come from. Each social cause they show an interest in increases their sense of belonging to the community, accelerating the inclusion process. They sense that their behaviour affects the contexts in which they participate, that they are able to generate change, thus helping transform the world.

## 8. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Reports about youths in vulnerable situations in this country offer worrying data on the intergenerational transmission of exclusion and statistics highlighting the fact that adolescents whose families have endured serious financial difficulties are twice as likely to drop out before finishing compulsory secondary school<sup>1</sup>. This

<sup>1</sup> The 8th report entitled *Sobre exclusión y desarrollo social en España. 2019* published by Fundación Foessa and the 2020 progress report entitled *Reconstruir lo común. La implementación de la agenda 2030 en España* published by the Ministry for Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge offer data on poverty and exclusion in Spain and how this affects childhood and adolescence.

research aims to contribute to the design of proposals that, through education, seek to interrupt the path of marginalization down which a sector of youths is headed, specifically those who are victims of poverty and a lack of opportunities.

The research described here has its pros and cons –outlined in the tables above where the successes and proposals for improvement are indicated. The extraordinarily positive assessments of the participants encourage us to continue working in this direction, but a critical exercise is nonetheless necessary. Certain pedagogical reflections can be gleaned from the findings to suggest new lines for future research in similar contexts. These reflections are briefly described below.

The changes rendered in the lives of the youths over the course of the experience were significant. This finding is in keeping with previous studies (Martín and López Dóriga, 2022) showing that adolescents and young adults with school failure have the necessary abilities to connect to culture and participate in society when the appropriate conditions are created. Leaving a socially disadvantaged sector of the population behind constitutes neglect in terms of social policy but also neglect by the educational sector.

This research focused on a group that is poised and sees itself ‘at the edge’, transitioning to adult life without the kind of support offered to the rest of the population. Despite the fragility of the diverse factors surrounding them and the isolation in which they live, the proposal is based on the youths’ autonomy and their ability to take control of their lives. As we hope to have shown, preparing this group to join the ranks of adult life with a chance of success entails addressing the subject of relationships and the creation of ties. Therefore, the research was aimed at designing a proposal for intervention in which it is possible to reconstruct and strengthen three dimensions of relationships: the relationship with oneself, relationships with peers, and relationships with adults.

To restore the relationship with oneself, personal digital storytelling (PDS) emerged as a strong tool for introspection, creating ideal conditions to allow for subjectivity and enabling each young person to express the significance of certain events in their life experience. It might be interesting to perform research with other groups at risk of exclusion, in order to create comparisons and assess the learning effect of personal stories on subjects who for diverse reasons live at the edge of society. Studies conducted on inmate populations, the seriously ill and immigrants show the effectiveness of PDS in prompting individuals in vulnerable situations to reflect on aspects of their lives that they deem important (Londoño and Rodríguez Illera, 2017; Annacontini *et al.*, 2020).

Peer relationships were strengthened through the sustained support of a reference group. The experience fostered positive emotions in the participants, the creation of a climate of trust and respect, and involvement with social institutions. The review of prosocial behaviour and school violence by González and Molero



(2023) showed these factors to be prosocial enablers, while scholars in diverse disciplines found these elements to be signs of well-being and mental health in people (Rojas Marcos, 2022; Cyrulnik, 2015). Therefore, it is worth specifically studying the effects of mutual aid in youths at risk of exclusion, minimizing adult support.

Regarding relationships with adults, the tailored attention and attitude of non-judgemental listening enabled the young men and women to establish relationships in a nearly horizontal fashion, which encourages us to continue studying new ways of mentoring that entail less involvement than required for the role of an ‘instructor’ but can still be decisive in reducing the sense of isolation felt by these youths when they leave their social and educational institutions, thus facilitating a smooth transition into adulthood (Boroel *et al.*, 2018; Spade, 2020).

To conclude, two elements should be highlighted. First, the successfulness of simultaneously working with all three pedagogical dynamics –mutual aid, self-awareness and adult mentoring– which results in a complex intervention system in which each element is bolstered. And second, the transformative capacity of the proposal, which is evidenced in the significant changes seen in the lives of the young participants.

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