

Chapter 2

Challenges and Perspectives in the Care of Young Unaccompanied Migrants: Recognizing the Role of Social Education

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ABSTRACT

Young people migrating alone is a group that requires special attention from government institutions and the corresponding professionals. The educational care of these young people who migrate alone is a highly complex task. This chapter presents a descriptive-comprehensive study using the survey technique with 17 semi-structured interviews. The results indicate that the educational task is largely carried out by the professional figure of social education, even when the professionals do not have the necessary resources to offer adequate attention to these young people who migrate alone. However, despite the advances and improvements in training with the entry of the European higher education area, social education professionals who work with young migrants alone continue to be one of the groups most likely to suffer from burnout syndrome due to the highly stressful conditions of their work. Therefore, these professionals continue to demand recognition and face new work challenges and conflict situations that are linked to their emotional and ethical dimension.

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INTRODUCTION

In Spain, research into the configuration processes of the social professions began almost twenty years ago (Sáez, 2007; Úcar, 2022a). A study of the social educator's profession by Fullana and Pallisera (2008) indicated that, after more than a decade of university degrees and official regulations recognizing this figure, there were no significant improvements in its professional recognition. According to Freidson (1999), this challenge of recognition belongs to the area of semantic professionalization. However, fourteen years later, despite the social educator's increasing professionalization in Spain (Tarín-Cayuela, 2022), these specialists continue to lack recognition; and this is even more deeply felt by a group that works with one of the most vulnerable sectors of our society, unaccompanied migrant youth. These professionals, then, not only face the task of gaining recognition, but also find themselves immersed in new challenges and complex situations that touch on the emotional dimension of their work. Transnational social transformations, such as the migration of young people in search of a better future, make new demands on professionalization and its models of intervention in social education.

As a result of the so-called "refugee crisis" (Síndic de Greuges de Catalunya, 2018), foster-care centers in Catalonia set up experimental projects and specific services for unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents with the explicit intention of safeguarding their rights. Social educators in these services play a key role in shaping these young people's educational and life projects (Quiroga, Venceslao, Chagas, Lapadula, 2023; Frounfelker, Miconi, Farrar, Brooks, Rousseau and Betancourt, 2020; Vilà, Sánchez, Freixa and Venceslao, in press). Thus, although public policy on child protection has been set in place, there is still no clear educational model that provides for these young people and resolves the contradictions between the role of the state, the law, the role of professionals in the sector and the exercise of the minors' rights. As a consequence, international reports on the situation in Spain highlight that, as in other EU countries, policies and programs tend to lack specific, standardized interventions that can respond adequately to the educational needs and learning problems of young refugees and asylum seekers (Gabielli and Pàmies, 2023).

The challenge is even greater when we bear in mind the diversity of these young people's migratory experiences (Vilà, Freixa, Sánchez-Martí, Massot and Ruiz, 2020). Kauhanen and Kaukko (2020) argue that reception and hosting models should take the characteristics of the group into account when analyzing the normally stressful effects of their migratory journeys. Each person brings with them a unique history, marked by different migratory and life experiences (Mohamed, Ruiz and Vilà, 2022). Thus, uncertainty about the future can be seen as a stressor affecting the mental health of young migrants (Frounfelker, et al., 2020). This means that social educators are faced with the task of individualizing their approaches and recognizing and respecting the uniqueness of each individual story; and this in turn requires constant adaptability in methods of intervention, ensuring that the specific needs of each young person are addressed. This context, characterized by its sensitivity and complexity, demands more than technical skills and competencies. It requires a deep emotional and cultural understanding on the part of social educators. They are called on to be agents of support and guidance in the process of reception and integration, providing a safe space for the expression of diverse identities and complex emotions (Vilà, Sánchez-Martí and Rubio, 2020). As some analysts have affirmed, the professionalization process "is never linear, nor is it rigid, that is to say one of quiet continuity [... There are] moments of advance and retreat, trying to identify, delineate and fully occupy an area of work in the professional field" (Bas, Campillo and Sáez, 2010, p. 40).

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