

High School Students' Attitudes towards Migrant Youth

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Abstract

The appearance of unaccompanied migrant minors in our communities and the impact they have had on Spanish society, and vice-versa, is a phenomenon of outstanding educational importance, as it has brought into public awareness issues such as child vulnerability and focused our attention on the legal, social and educational policies and resources that are meant to materialise an inclusive, democratic and just society. Around these young people, mainly from the Maghreb and therefore identified with Islam, society has created an image that serves to bolster many Islamophobic, xenophobic and racist discourses emanating from the media and the ideologies of Spanish far-right political parties. This is achieved by generalising the criminal conduct of some migrant youths, by depersonalising them as human beings and by linking news about them to vicarious emotions such as mistrust and the feeling of menace. Recognising the importance of this phenomenon, in this article we present the results of a study aiming to identify and analyse the main stereotypes, attitudes and prejudices that Barcelona secondary-school students have towards unaccompanied migrant minors (MENA in their Spanish initials). To this end a questionnaire based on the Overcoming Prejudice Scale (Etxeberria, Murua, Arrieta, Garmendia & Etxeberria, 2012) was administered. Our findings showed that high-school students hold certain prejudices and stereotypes that should be tackled in order to promote the integration and inclusion of unaccompanied migrant minors and to ensure a culture of peace among young people.

Keywords: immigration, migrants, unaccompanied youth, attitudes, prejudices, secondary-school students, secondary education.

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Introduction

In this article we centre on unaccompanied migrant minors and the prejudices that they arouse among their contemporaries, i.e., high-school students. Unaccompanied migrant youth are a group whose highly specific characteristics make them easily identifiable, almost uniquely so on the map of European migration. According to Spanish Interior Ministry data, in 2019 there were a total of 12,301 unaccompanied migrant minors in Spain, the majority from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. Most of these children and youths are male and travel via road. Stowed away or incognito in lorries and buses, they make a long and arduous journey whose final destination is normally the countries of central and northern Europe. Theirs is an odyssey filled with hardships, setbacks and long, sometimes permanent stopovers in the largest and best-connected cities of Spain. The most important and distinctive feature of this group is the absence of protective figures; in other words, these children and adolescents undertake their migration project without their families or any other adults accompanying and protecting them (Perrazzo, & Zuppirolo, 2018). This means that they present highly specific psycho-social, legal and sociological characteristics and suffer from a number of serious and complex needs and problems. In this context, the Spanish state system for child protection is currently revealing its limitations in terms of responding effectively to the extreme vulnerability of these minors (Gimeno, 2018), whose rights are as a result violated, from their arrival in the country on, at the hands of criminal gangs and networks, radical organisations, etc.

As one would expect, these unaccompanied minors take refuge with other migrant groups in the main areas of Spain that host immigrants, such as Catalonia, Andalusia, Madrid, the Canary Islands and Valencia. Unaccompanied minors in our cities and communities have become a group with extensive social and media impact, as the media constantly spread news about incidents in which they are involved. This has given rise to a phenomenon of great educational importance, since it focuses public attention on issues such as the vulnerability of minors and the relevance and congruence of the legal, social and educational policies and resources aimed at creating an inclusive, democratic and socially just Spain.

Catalonia stands out as the preferred destination for unaccompanied minors, since it is the closest by road to the rest of Europe and has major national and international transport links. The region is also significant in terms of migration and international mobility in Spain. Since the 1980s, it has become an international hub both in the reception of migrants from the Maghreb, Latin America and Asia and for other types of migrants more related to globalised business, research and education: employees of multinational companies and international students at all stages of education. Economic migrants are distributed throughout Catalonia in the agricultural areas, tourist resorts and industrial zones. Apart from this, the greater Barcelona metropolitan area is a special case, as it has become a magnet for white-collar workers in transnational corporations and the site of whole panoply

of international educational institutions and programmes, attracting a large number of foreign students. In addition, we should also note the city's substantial rates of emigration among highly-skilled workers.⁵ This is the background to our project: a diverse, cosmopolitan society in which unaccompanied migrant minors live in small towns or run-down inner-city neighbourhoods and pass through a range of different socio-educational facilities and services while waiting to pursue their journeys, with the goal of achieving, in one way or another, the legal status that will allow them to integrate themselves socially and occupationally in Catalan society or move on through Europe. This period of waiting is highly visible and even disturbing for a large part of the host society, due to the media treatment of the group, as commented on above.

When evaluating the level of citizenship competences in a society that aspires to be inclusive, intercultural and democratic, the relationships between minorities and the majority society and between recently-arriving populations and those that have roots in the community are significant factors. Among the diverse aspects of these relationships, we focus here on prejudices and stereotypes among local youth (da Silva, Fernández, & Meneses, 2020), particularly towards unaccompanied migrant minors. Although in Catalan society these prejudices are not normally expressed in explicitly violent or racist behaviours, they find more subtle, indirect outlets. People tend to verbalise their prejudices by referring to feelings such as unease, insecurity and threat, amongst others. Therefore, understanding stereotypes of and prejudices towards unaccompanied migrant minors among settled, educated local youth, whatever their origins, is key to identifying what should specifically be addressed in education and the media in order to alleviate and prevent discrimination, marginalisation and radicalisation within this group.

We also set out to investigate the relationship between these prejudices and attitudes towards interreligious relations, since the majority of unaccompanied migrant minors either practice or identify with the Islamic religion, and because intercultural and interreligious dialogue features among the measures put forward by the European Commission (2015) for preventing religious intolerance and radicalisation. Thus, the EU *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue* defines dialogue as “an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage on the basis of mutual understanding and respect” (Council of Europe 2008, p10).

All of this, then, formed the basis of the study presented here, whose objectives were to identify prejudices towards unaccompanied migrant minors and to analyse them in relation to the interreligious attitudes of secondary-school students in the

⁵ According to AMB data (2019), 52% of the total working population of Catalonia is concentrated in the metropolitan area of Barcelona. Due to the high population density of the area, 14% of residents are foreign and there are 40 international educational institutions.

city of Barcelona, where in 2017, 1,489 unaccompanied migrant minors were registered.

Methodology

In order to achieve the above objectives a survey study was carried out, using a questionnaire for adolescents in compulsory secondary education as the data-gathering instrument. This study is framed within a project funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation, titled “Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue for Promoting a Culture of Peace among Unaccompanied Minors in Barcelona and Melilla” (RTI2018-095259-B-I00, MCIU/AEI/FEDER, UE), and carried out jointly by the University of Barcelona Education Faculty and the University of Granada at Melilla.

Population and sample

The population chosen was third- and fourth-year students in compulsory secondary education (ESO in its Spanish initials) at both state and public-private schools in the city of Barcelona (28,462 students; public-private schools which in Spain are state-subsidised private schools). Participants were aged from 14 to 16. The sample was constructed through random cluster sampling, with each cluster comprising the secondary schools in one of the 10 districts of the city of Barcelona. Access to the schools was gained through the *Consorci d'Educació de Barcelona*, the body responsible for education in the city. This body is made up of the two institutions responsible for regulating and managing the city's education system: the City Council and the Education Department of the *Generalitat de Catalunya* (Catalan devolved regional government).

In total, 942 students from 12 secondary schools (both state and public-private) responded to the questionnaire. The participating schools were located in seven of the ten districts of the city. The confidence level was 95.5%, with an error margin of ± 0.032 . Of the students taking part, 55.7% were from state schools and 44.3% from public-private. Schools from the districts of Ciutat Vella, Sarrià-Sant Gervasi, Gràcia, Horta-Guinardó, Nou Barris, Sant Andreu and Sant Martí were represented (Table 1). Participants had an average age of 14.8; 53.9% were third- year students and 44.4% fourth-years; and a total of 504 identified themselves as female (53.5%), 409 as male (43.4%) and 29 as other (3.1%).

Table 1. Districts, schools, types of school and students participating by totals and school year

District	School	Type	Number of students	% of total participants	3 rd -year students	4 th -year students
Ciutat Vella	School 1	State	111	11.8%	86	25
					77.5%	22.5%
	School 2	Public-private	43	4.6%	7	20
					25.9%	74.1%
Sarrià-Sant Gervasi	School 3	Public-private	72	7.7%	34	38
					47.2%	52.8%
	School 4	Public-private	36	3.8%	18	18
					50.0%	50.0%
Gràcia	School 5	Public-private	82	8.7%	11	71
					13.4%	86.6%
Horta-Guinardó	School 6	State	95	10.1%	43	52
					45.3%	54.7%
Nou Barris	School 7	State	98	10.4%	49	49
					50.0%	50.0%
	School 8	Public-private	34	3.6%	21	13
					61.8%	38.2%
Sant Andreu	School 9	Public-private	53	5.7%	41	12
					77.4%	22.6%
	School 10	Public-private	96	10.2%	67	29
					69.8%	30.2%
Sant Martí	School 11	State	157	16.7%	87	70
					55.4%	44.6%
	School 12	State	61	6.5%	44	17
					72.1%	27.9%

In terms of participants' family origins, defined as the origin of the mother and/or father, 54.1% stated that they were Catalan or Spanish, 5.9% from other European countries, and 39.9% from countries in the rest of the world.

Instrument

The Overcoming Prejudice towards Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Scale (Table 2) was adapted in order to identify prejudices towards this group among 3rd- and 4th-year students of ESO. The scale was validated previously by Etxeberria, Murua, Arrieta, Garmendia and Etxeberria (2012), and the Cronbach's alpha measure of internal consistency showed it to be reliable.

Table 2. Questionnaire dimensions

Items	Scale	Nº items	Cronbach's alpha
Socio-demographic and identifying data (family origins, school year, school, friends, knowledge of religious coexistence and spirituality)	Nominal scale	11	0.871
Overcoming Prejudice towards Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Scale	Likert-5 points	21	

The Overcoming Prejudice Scale, developed by Etxeberria, Murua, Arrieta, Garmendia and Etxeberria (2012) at the Universidad del País Vasco is an instrument evaluating prejudices and stereotypes regarding migrants. The scale was elaborated on the basis of the findings of studies by the Red Cross, Barcelona City Council, the Basque regional government (Spain) and the European Council, amongst others. According to its authors, one of the most important factors when assessing relationships between locals and migrants are students' attitudes towards foreign people. Prejudices and stereotypes play a core role in these relationships, since they normally constitute people's first steps in understanding others and their first notions on how to deal with an unknown person. While such ideas may thus seem necessary, at the same time they should be combatted, as they operate to the detriment of the people one wishes to know. In this context, prejudice is not expressed in behaviours of hate or overt racism, but in terms of more subtle feelings such as unease, insecurity, and threat, amongst others. On the basis of these considerations, a questionnaire was developed at the Universidad del País Vasco, gathering ideas and statements on migrants, both positive and negative (Etxeberria *et al.*, 2012).

Data-gathering and analysis procedure

The questionnaire was administered during May, June and November 2021, with support from the Consorci d'Educación de Barcelona, enabling contact with and access to the schools. The survey was carried out face-to-face in the schools, with the researchers present to inform participants of the objectives and purposes of the study and answer any questions arising. After piloting and validating the measuring instruments, the first analysis of the data was made in November and December 2021.

A descriptive analysis of all the study data was performed: in the case of the quantitative variables, the measures of the central tendency and standard deviation were analysed, and for the qualitative data, the frequency of appearance of the categories. Hypothesis-contrasting tests were also carried out (t-student for two independent groups and one-way Anova) to identify differences in the scale scores according to socio-demographic and identity variables.

Lastly, to identify profiles among the prejudices towards unaccompanied migrant youths, a two-step cluster analysis was carried out, enabling the automatic selection of the optimum number of clusters (Bacher, Wenzig, & Vogler, 2004).

Results and discussion

Coexistence in diversity

A first finding was that 64.3% of the local youth had had no contact with or formed any friendship with the foreign youth, while 35.7% stated that they had. Most participants (75.3%) reported that in their schools they had been taught to live together with people from other countries and of other origins. 24.7%, however, said that they had received no education in this area. Regarding coexistence with people of other beliefs (defined as religious, spiritual, agnostic and/or atheist), most respondents (76.8%) stated that at their school they had been educated in living together with people of differing beliefs, while 23.2% said they had not.

Knowledge of religion and work on spirituality in schools

It should be noted that the Spanish state, which conceives of itself as non-confessional, recognises religious education in compulsory schooling as a universal right. This means that in practice religious education is not a compulsory subject in schools, and religion and spirituality are approached flexibly and freely in a range of subjects, settings and curricula. In this area, most students (65.7%) said that they had received education on religion, and 34.3% said they had not. Regarding the setting in which they had received this education, 28.6% had received it at school and other places, 18.9% only at school and 16.9% outside school. As for the treatment of spirituality in schools, 59.9% said that they had worked on this topic, while 40.1% said they had not.

Prejudices towards unaccompanied migrant youth

In general, the students surveyed had broadly similar prejudices and stereotypes, thus showing that they had a moderate level of prejudice towards unaccompanied migrant youth (Table 3).

Table 3. Statistics from the Overcoming Prejudice towards Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Scale

	N	Theoretical minimum score	Theoretical maximum score	Mean observed	Standard deviation
Overcoming Prejudice towards Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Scale	942	21	105	77.1964	13.13207

Statistically significant differences were found in terms of gender, type of school and students’ perceptions of the education they had received at school in intercultural and interreligious coexistence. Thus, the following groups of students had gone further in overcoming prejudice toward unaccompanied migrant youth:

- (1) Girls as compared to boys ($t=5.478$, $p=0.000$);
- (2) State schools as compared to public-private ($t=4.591$, $p=0.000$);
- (3) Young people who perceived that they had been educated in coexistence with people from other countries and origins at their school ($t=-3.513$, $p=0.001$);
- (4) Participants who perceived that they had been taught to live together with people of differing beliefs at their schools ($t=-4.070$, $p=0.000$);
- (5) ($F=19.079$, $p=0.000$). Students with family origins from other parts of the world (table 4) compared to those born in Catalonia, Spain or other European countries.

Table 4. Statistics from the Prejudice Scale by countries of participants’ family origins

		Overcoming Prejudice towards Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Scale	
		Mean	Standard deviation
Country of family origin	Catalonia or Spain	75.22	13.60
	Europe	76.78	9.74
	Rest of world	80.65	11.88

Surprisingly, there were no statistically significant differences between students who had related to young foreigners and those who had not ($t=-0.414$, $p=0.679$). The same applied between schools that had or had not worked on spirituality or the inner life ($t=0.998$, $p=0.318$). Neither were there any statistically significant differences due to having received religious education at school or outside of it ($t=-1.027$, $p=0.305$), or between 3rd- and 4th-year students ($t=1.211$, $p=0.226$).

Profiles of prejudice towards unaccompanied migrant youth

The two-step cluster analysis was performed with the variable of the Overcoming Prejudice towards Unaccompanied Migrant Youth Scale together with some of the significant variables mentioned above: namely, the perception of having been educated at school in coexistence with people of diverse origins and beliefs, and the place of family origin. Three clusters with a good level of quality were identified (*Figure 1*).

Model Summary

Algorithm	TwoStep
Input Features	4
Clusters	3

Cluster Quality

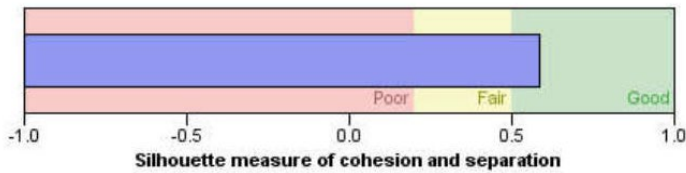


Figure 1. Model of clusters created by the two-step cluster analysis

These three clusters corresponded to participant profiles with differing levels of prejudice towards unaccompanied migrant youth (Figure 2):

Clusters

Feature Importance			
1.0 0.8 0.6 0.4 0.2			
Cluster	3	1	2
Label	3rd cluster	1st cluster	2nd cluster
Description	Native youth with intercultural and interreligious competence but certain prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children	Youth of diverse backgrounds with less intercultural or interreligious competence and more prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children	Youth of foreign origin with more intercultural and interreligious competence and less prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children
Size	38.1% (347)	32.7% (298)	29.2% (266)
Features	Family origin Catalunya o Espanya (100.0%)	Family origin Catalunya o Espanya (49.0%)	Family origin Mòn (100.0%)
	Live with people from other countries yes (100.0%)	Live with people from other countries no (73.5%)	Live with people from other countries yes (100.0%)
	Live with people of different faiths yes (100.0%)	Live with people of different faiths no (68.5%)	Live with people of different faiths yes (100.0%)
	Scale of prejudice 76.92	Scale of prejudice 74.79	Scale of prejudice 81.23

Figure 2. Characteristics of the clusters in the two-step cluster analysis

The three clusters were defined in the following way:

Cluster 1. Youth of diverse backgrounds with less intercultural and interreligious competence and more prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children. The first cluster comprised 298 young people (33%) of relatively diverse family origins, almost half from Catalonia or Spain and the rest from other European or non-European countries. This group had the lowest score on the Prejudice Scale and were therefore those with the most prejudice towards unaccompanied migrant minors. Nevertheless, the mean was still relatively low (75 out of 105 points). These participants were those who mostly stated that they did not feel sufficiently educated at school for living together with people from different origins or with differing beliefs.

Cluster 2. Youth of foreign origin with more intercultural and interreligious competence and less prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children. This cluster was made up of 266 young people (29%), all with family origins in non-European countries. They had the highest score in the Prejudice Scale (81 out of 105 points), and thus showed the lowest level of prejudice. All of them also stated that they felt educated at their schools for intercultural and interreligious coexistence.

Cluster 3. Native youth with intercultural and interreligious competence but certain prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children. This cluster numbered 347 young people (38%), all of Catalan or Spanish origin. Their mean scores on the Scale were lower than cluster 2 but slightly higher than cluster 1 (77 out of 105), showing a certain degree of prejudice towards unaccompanied migrant minors. All said that they felt educated at their schools for intercultural and interreligious coexistence.

Below we outline these three profiles in more depth in relation to the remaining variables (Table 5). When investigating which variables were linked to the different participant profiles, we found that the following were significant: having had contact with unaccompanied migrant minors; having received religious education; and having received spiritual education.

As Table 5 shows, profile 1 (youth of diverse backgrounds with less intercultural and interreligious competence and more prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children) was also characterised by being the group that stated it had had the most contact with unaccompanied migrant minors, at 41%. They were also those who had less spiritual and religious education.

Profile 3 (native youth with intercultural and interreligious competence but certain prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children) was that which had the least contact with unaccompanied migrant minors (71% had had no relation), and were also those who had the most religious and spiritual education.

Clusters

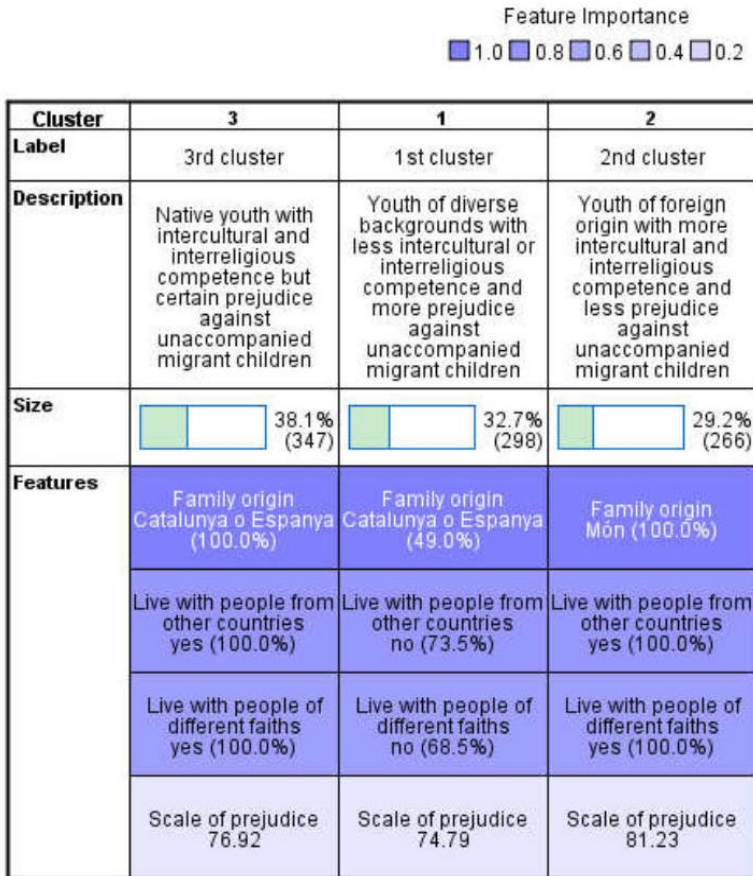


Figure 2. Characteristics of the clusters in the two-step cluster analysis

Lastly, profile 2 (youth of foreign origin with more intercultural and interreligious competence and less prejudice against unaccompanied migrant children) did not stand out in any of the three variables, remaining at levels between those of the other profiles.

Conclusion

This article has presented findings stemming from the identification and analysis of prejudice towards unaccompanied migrant minors and attitudes towards interreligious dialogue, obtained by means of the Overcoming Prejudice toward Unaccompanied Migrant Minors Scale (Etxeberria, *et al.*, 2012) and the

Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Competences Questionnaire (Abu-Nimer, 2001), the latter administered in Barcelona secondary schools in the 2020-21 school year. The study forms part of an ongoing nationwide research project whose purpose is to contribute towards building a more cohesive society, especially among young people, bearing in mind that unaccompanied young foreigners with diverse cultural and religious backgrounds make up a significant part of Spanish youth.

The findings presented here constitute an initial analysis of the data, mainly descriptive, allowing us to obtain an overview of the situation in the schools and amongst their students. Up to 942 students participated, all in their 3rd and 4th years of compulsory secondary education (ESO) and from a range of secondary schools in Barcelona. 7 of the 10 districts of the city were represented, thus yielding a representative and diverse sample.

Secondary schools have become the first setting in which intercultural and democratic competences, including social inclusion and interreligious dialogue, can be developed. At these schools, students from diverse origins and different traditions, mostly minorized, come together and relate to each other in a stable and permanent way. The school is a reflection of the society and of a culturally diverse city; yet, as in the public sphere, the different groups there do not necessarily interact. It is in class that children and adolescents are required both formally and informally to learn (and where they do indeed learn) to live, work and form relationships together, thereby overcoming the barriers, prejudices and problems that they may encounter at home and in the media and which may emerge in their everyday lives.

There is no doubt that adolescents are exposed to a media bombardment against unaccompanied migrant minors. At home they watch the news and talk about the events reported, and some see these minors in the public squares, stations, streets, etc. But it is at school where all this can be nuanced, mediated, analysed and understood critically. For this reason, we see our findings regarding the prejudices of native youth towards migrant children and adolescents in a relatively positive light.

Religious education gives rise to much debate and analysis in Western societies. The tendency towards the secularisation of society, criticism of religious institutions and the rise of non-institutionalised spiritual practices resulting in religion being perceived in education policy as matter of private choice, contrast sharply with the value given religion and the importance of religious identity and practice in other societies. This value is turned into a stigma in the case of certain groups, amongst them unaccompanied migrant minors. To this we should add that religion and people's knowledge of their religious traditions have since time immemorial been the site of values, rites and artistic creations that have shaped human heritage, a heritage that we cannot simply lose or forget. How can we resolve this contradiction? This is the great challenge for education and modern society.

In our view, competence in intercultural and interreligious dialogue constitutes a key factor.

Here we should turn our attention to two widely-used constructs in intercultural theory. One is what is called the hypothesis of contact. This argues that contact in itself does not ensure a satisfactory intercultural relationship. What is important is not the quantity but the quality of relationships (Paluck, *et al.* 2019; Zhou *et al.*, 2019). The existence of cultural diversity in a city and its schools is not a measure that predicts competence. Thus, our findings on students' prejudices and relatively positive attitudes towards intercultural and interreligious dialogue are, in our view, evidence for the good educational work that is being done in this sphere in our schools.

The second topic relates to uncertainty avoidance (Gudykunst & Nishida, 1999; Bazrafshan & Bashir, 2020). According to this theory, tolerance of the uncertainty caused by the unknown and the different is key in intercultural and interreligious relations. This is an attitude that varies amongst individuals and is linked to certain personality traits (Jach, & Smillie, 2019) and values that are more prominent in some groups rather than others (Alipour, 2019; Babič, *et al.*, 2018). This may explain to a certain extent the clusters found in our study, bearing in mind that Hofstede (2011) characterised Spain as a society with medium-to-low uncertainty tolerance (Gerlach, & Eriksson, 2021).

Many questions for the future arise from these findings. It is necessary to ascertain how these competences for coexistence with people from other countries and cultures have developed, and how school students have been taught to accept religious and spiritual beliefs in a secular social setting.

As for attitudes towards unaccompanied migrant youth, the students surveyed seemed to have overcome prejudice to a certain extent, although this cannot be generalised to all students, nor does it hold good for all schools. The overcoming of prejudice towards unaccompanied migrant youth is better developed in state schools and in those that educate young people in how to live together with people from other countries and origins and with different beliefs.

One particularly striking aspect of the findings that would be interesting to investigate more rigorously is that of the significant differences in terms of gender. We believe this to be especially important.

In our view these findings are highly significant and underscore the vital importance of working through education, specifically in secondary schools, for the construction of a culture of peace in a more inclusive society. Analysing how young people position themselves and act in the school environment is not only crucial for working on intercultural and interreligious dialogue but also for the construction of a culture of peace in a diverse world, particularly in cities like Barcelona, where so many people of different origins and beliefs live side by side.

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