

Dialogic Literary Gatherings in out-of-home care to overcome educational inequalities by improving school academic performance

Abstract

There is much research revealing the educational inequality that affects children and youth in out-of-home care. Some reasons are the institutionalization impact on cognitive, social, and language development; problems of coexistence, or the low expectations of caregivers about their academic possibilities, leading to high rates of school failure and early school leaving. However, there is a lack of knowledge about which specific actions could reverse these adverse impacts and contribute to overcoming educational inequality in disadvantaged contexts. This paper analyzes a Dialogic Literary Gatherings intervention with 13 adolescents and 7 social workers on a group home for the protection and preparation for independent living of victims of family violence and neglect. Monthly Dialogic Literary Gatherings were developed with teenagers between 15 and 18 years old. Data collection consisted of a focus group of 5 adolescents, 2 in-depth interviews with adolescents and 2 in-depth interviews addressed to social workers. School results before and after the intervention have also been analyzed. The research was developed through the Communicative Methodology, which made it possible to analyze the components of the Dialogic Literary Gatherings that contribute to increase academic achievement in this environment. This approach involves the participants through an egalitarian dialogue that encourages them to promote changes in their environment. Beyond simultaneous improvements in the social and emotional well-being of the participants, our findings suggest improvements in the increase of their academic expectations, which reverse in positive progress of their school academic achievements after the intervention.

Keywords

Dialogic Literary Gatherings, out-of-home care, group home, academic skills, educational expectations, Successful Educational Actions

1. Introduction

There is still a long way to reduce the inequalities affecting millions of children across the globe in terms of meeting the targets set by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in which, for the first time, child protection issues are directly addressed as a new and greater opportunity to improve the lives of each and everyone without leaving anyone behind. UNICEF's 2018 report on the state of the world's children, warned of a critical moment for the child and youth protection structures calling for strengthening the capacity of

frontline social workers and child protection systems, as well as for knowledge generation, evidence the collecting and development of solutions. In this regard, education is one of the priorities established by the European Union to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and to improve social cohesion.

The wide recognition of the adverse impacts of institutionalization on children development and well-being has been documented by scientific studies such as education (Gairal et al., 2019), psychiatric (Bos et al., 2011), or from specialized child protection systems (Petrowski et al., 2017) and mental health services (Monson et al., 2019). Current paradigms for children in out-of-home care emphasize the concern for adapting protection measures to children's developmental needs and for improving the quality of the institutional environment. To this end, one of the greatest challenges for institutional child protection systems throughout Europe is to favor a broader view focused on educational outcomes as a key to breaking educational inequality, favoring the transition into independent life, and contributing to the social inclusion of this population at risk. Covering the protection and development needs of children and youth who cannot remain in their homes, also involves attending educational needs, due to the high risk of early dropout from the education system or the low rates of access to post-secondary and university studies.

In Spain, according to the latest statistical data bulletin, more than 50,000 minors and adolescents are cared for by the state protection system, of which more than 21,000 are placed in different types of out-of-home care, a rate that is increasing annually (Spanish Government, 2020). The educational paths of children in out-of-home care still remain an issue of concern, however, we found little research that deals with assessing and solving this problem. A follow-up study on the risk of exclusion of young people under institutional care in Spain in 2013 pointed to low academic expectations, the low priority given to their schooling by professionals and those responsible for the protection systems in our country, and the invisibility they suffer within the education system as factors that are hindering their social inclusion (Montserrat et al., 2013).

This article aims to complement the gap in knowledge on what specific educational actions can be implemented to reduce the high risk of educational failure and, therefore, social exclusion of minors and youth in out-of-home care. In what follows, we present a scientific literature review on the adverse impacts of institutionalization on development and academic chances that justify the relevance of this intervention. Subsequently, the third section includes the socio-educational impact that previous research has shown about Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) as an effective action for overcoming educational inequalities and improving school academic performance in very diverse environments. The fourth section describes the case study and the methodology carried out during the research and data analysis. It also explains the procedure for the implementation of DLGs and an important step such as the choice of books. The results are then presented and, finally, the conclusions of this work are discussed on how educational inequalities can be overcome through Successful Educational Actions (SEAs) such as DLGs also in environments of out-of-home care.

2. Out-of-home care's impact on the development and socioeducational inclusion

2.1. Implications for cognitive, social and language development

Language and social interaction are key to the development of all people and childhood is a very important period for the acquisition of these communication skills whose imprint has an impact both on children's immediate well-being and on their later social and educational success (Lum et al., 2015). Studies evidence considerable deficits in the linguistic quality of children who have experienced neglect or maltreatment, both comprehensively and expressively as well as deficits in the quantity of vocabulary acquired (Goldfarb, 1945; Lum et al., 2018). This deprivation suffered by minors with prolonged experience in out-of-home care is generating an inequality from early ages, increases throughout life and has a proven impact on other cognitive limitations that also affect phonological awareness and the learning of reading and writing (Cobos-Cali et al., 2018). This, consequently, decrease the chances of future academic performance (Romano et al., 2015).

Research demonstrates that brain development is highly dependent on the combination of sensory, cognitive, linguistic, and social experience mechanisms (Kandel et al., 2013) in interactive, reciprocal, responsive, affective, predictable, and coherent environments (Balbernie, 2001). The lack of these elements in many forms of out-of-home care can lead to incorrect wiring of neural circuits and impact on brain structure that also causes deficits in memory and attention (Berens & Nelson, 2015).

The studies by Goldfarb (1943; 1945) and those subsequently developed by Bowlby (1952) for the WHO, were particularly influential in highlighting the negative consequences of institutionalization on development at the social level as well. In line with more recent research, the mentioned works proved effects of social immaturity, low capacity to establish selective personal bonds, passivity and apathy, instability and lack of emotional control, unreflective behavior, insecurity, incoherent interactions that did not show caution towards unknown adult persons or appearance of stereotypies of almost autistic self-stimulation (Tottenham, 2012). The chronic stress hypothesis stemming from a stressful institutional environment (McCall, 2013) and the lack of a secure attachment figure in early childhood are described as among the most relevant causes for the brain developmental damage and interaction problems suffered by institutionalized children (Baldwin et al., 2019).

These worrisome adverse impacts are not only due to institutionalization *per se*, considering the history of abuse or parental neglect that these children have suffered, but research does show that they present serious inequalities with respect to non-institutionalized children and that these negative effects are reversed when they find stable foster and adoptive homes that provide them with the necessary care from a protective family nucleus (Stevens et al., 2018). Studies warn that even "good" institutional care can have detrimental effects in terms of attachment for later social interaction, depending largely on the consistency of the

caregiver and his or her sensitivity, warmth, and selective, individual and affectionate attention to children (McCall, 2013).

However, the results of several studies on the so-called “sensitive periods” for brain development in children raised in out-of-home care suggest that there is no critical age after which recovery is not possible (Zeanah, et al., 2011). This is because the developing system is highly plastic and there are mechanisms of social support and emotional regulation linked to resilience for overcoming adversity, chronic stress, and trauma (Horn & Feder, 2018). Therefore, being institutionalized children a population at high risk of inequity, while enhancing programs for deinstitutionalization through adoption and family care, measures are urgently needed to improve institutional environments and the awareness, training, and education of social workers, having solid scientific evidence that the quality of their verbal and nonverbal interactions with children produces substantial advances in physical, mental, social and emotional development (Baldwin et al., 2019).

2.2. Associated factors of social exclusion risk

Longitudinal studies developed on the life trajectories of children in out-of-home care show that neglect or maltreatment suffered in the family environment are joined by later social, economic, and health disadvantages that begin to appear in early adulthood (Brännström et al., 2017; Teyhan et al., 2018; Viner & Taylor, 2005). One of them is the high risk of unemployment, with access to the labor market being a very important factor for social inclusion (Arnau-Sabatés & Gillian, 2015). Among other cumulative risk circumstances, higher probabilities of suffering poverty, incarceration, lack of decent housing, or greater exposure to violence are identified because of the multiple adversities that reflect their life histories (Raviv et al., 2010). Specifically, research on adolescents in out-of-home care also evidences an increased risk of antisocial behavior and delinquency (Maneiro et al., 2019), as well as other psychosocial risk factors (Martin et. al, 2013). This is related to out-of-home care because of instability of the environment, unmet educational needs, low expectations about their development and their academic achievement, or increased likelihood of exposure to drugs and violence (Kobulsky, 2019).

All these factors contribute to greater difficulties in learning and academic achievement, but also may provide keys to protection. As for the school environment, more and better teacher training is needed to address the academic lack of motivation and behavioral problems of students in out-of-home care. In these spaces, more research focused on this population is needed to develop effective programs aimed at preventing school failure as a high-risk variable for social exclusion, since the biggest problem of institutionalized minors is that they reach adulthood with a low educational level (Brännström et al., 2017).

The transition to the independent life of children in out-of-home care continues to be a challenge for both research and social welfare policies (Fernandez & Barth, 2010). Therefore, to reverse the inequalities faced, additional needs aimed at overcoming the low rates of completion of compulsory education, their low presence in higher education, and the incidence of these factors in subsequent unemployment problems

and other long-term psychosocial disadvantages that pose risk factors for social exclusion must be contemplated from all areas of action (Tessier et al., 2018).

2.3. Educational inequality

Although inequality is a multidimensional challenge, it mainly focuses on results and opportunities, being education a key policy instrument to break down these barriers and move towards social equality. To contribute to “ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all” (SDG2030), the EU proposes to reduce early school leaving and improve educational attainment, with special emphasis on the most vulnerable population: “Targeted individual support integrates social, economic, educational and psychological support for young people in difficulty. This is especially important for those who have serious social or emotional problems that prevent them from continuing their studies or training” (EU, 2011). Particularly, educational inequality in institutionalized children and youth, translates into lower percentiles in the instrumental areas of reading, writing, and mathematics, difficulties in reasoning and problem-solving skills, disinterest and demotivation for studies, irregular attendance at educational centers, increased levels of absenteeism and, finally, early school dropout (Laurens et al., 2020; Lum et al., 2018; Tordón et al., 2019). However, research on the educational attainment of minors and youth in out-of-home care is very limited, and existing studies mostly focus on the socio-economic background of this population and on the process of institutionalization and its effects, always from a social perspective rather than from an educational approach.

Aim at establishing a consensus on residential care practices, the Government of Spain, published in 2012 three reports on “Quality standards in residential care. EQUAR-E”. The first one presents the generic quality standards in non-specialized out-of-home care in which “Standard 11: Studies and training”, assesses indicators of standardized schooling (performance, qualification and support for school work), equipment and material for study, activities and programs for reinforcement of learning skills and objectives for the development of study skills and habits in the protection centers making reference to the fact that “all necessary support should be sought or provided when there are problems with school performance, as well as working at home on study habits and specific programs and tasks to overcome learning and motivation problems” (del Valle et al., 2012, 58). Educational inequality continues to be one of the most repeated adverse impacts in the institutionalization, which is why the quality indicators report indicates that “support for study and the fight against any obstacle that prevents adequate progress in schooling and training must be a priority objective” (del Valle et al., 2012, 58).

3. Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) to overcoming educational inequalities

Dialogic Literary Gatherings is one of the so-called “Successful Educational Actions” identified by the European R&D Project INCLUD-ED (Flecha, 2015) due to the solid evidence of social impact demonstrated

through their direct and simultaneous involvement on both the improvement of academic performance and the minimization of the risks of exclusion in any cultural or geographical context (European Commission, 2011). The DLGs are an educational performance based on the collective meaning construction through interactions and egalitarian dialogue between diverse people on the best creations of humanity in the literary field. Its objective is not only the comprehension of the written text, but the transformation that dialogic communicative acts and quality interactions produce both in the development of higher psychological processes (Fernández-Ortúbe et al., 2021) and in the creation of thoughts, feelings and universal values in human beings such as social justice, solidarity, friendship or love. They are, therefore, a universal practice that continues to be rigorously researched in a multitude of social contexts and supported by publications of international impact.

3.1. Academic dimension of learning

Language is the most important psychological skill and its level of development, being social, depends greatly on the quality and quantity of interactions to which a person is exposed throughout his or her life (López de Aguilera, 2019). Likewise, the domain of academic language directly affects the learning of reading and writing, which are vehicular tools in all school subjects. This makes its development a predictor of academic success throughout the entire educational system (Uccelli et al., 2015).

Research on the implications of dialogic reading on cognitive and language development has demonstrated its effectiveness in optimizing the possibilities of any person to acquire in a generalized way the development of higher level cognitive processes (Fernández-Ortúbe, 2021). In these interactive learning spaces, practice in reading comprehension skills is joined by training in argumentative and discursive skills when the people who participate have to explain their interpretations of the work read, receiving in turn feedback on their ideas (Avci & Yüksel, 2011; Goldman, 2012; López de Aguilera, 2019) and propitiating the creation of chains of dialogues that become part of the discourse itself.

In DLGs, the choice of the best works of literature ensures the instrumental dimension of learning, as it facilitates the emergence of knowledge from different curricular areas and provides the opportunity for interaction with relevant texts of great linguistic richness that promote the acquisition of academic language (López de Aguilera, 2019). Simultaneously, dialogic reading increases communicative competencies and reading comprehension skills, improves literacy, communicative competencies, vocabulary acquisition, discourse structuring and even academic motivation (Díez-Palomar et al., 2020; Fernández-Villardón et al., 2021). In this regard, the results of a research analyzing a five-week DLGs intervention with children in out-of-home care revealed impacts of improvement in the acquisition of reading habit, in the development of taste for higher quality literary works, in reading competencies to carry out school tasks and in the increase of vocabulary, competencies for oral expression, reasoning or language learning (García-Yeste et al., 2017).

For all these reasons, one of the indispensable conditions for the development of a DLG is the choice of classic books or works universally considered as the best literary creations in the world. The cognitive impact of reading the best literature has also been investigated from neuroscience, with results showing that these books include a great variety of rhetorical resources capable of challenging our brain and causing real neuronal storms (Keidel, 2013). This is in addition to the subsequent dialogue in the DLG, that makes possible what Bakhtin (1981) called “dialogic imagination”, a process through which people generate knowledge in interaction with others by incorporating their dialogues in communication, which makes it possible to generate more knowledge and establish solid bridges between “the known” and “the new” (Rogoff, 1993).

3.2. Prosocial dimension

In addition to their high academic level, the greatest works of world literature stand out for the possibility they offer to discuss the ethical dimension of the human being. This is possible because they reflect in great depth the most important universal themes of concern throughout history, such as social injustice, war, love or friendship. Thus, research aimed at analyzing learning in interactive reading environments, in turn, obtain results that point to the improvement of coexistence and emotional well-being (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2020; Serrano et al., 2010; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2018) and to the increase of prosocial behaviors of collaboration and solidarity that favor the creation and strengthening of friendly relationships within the group (García-Carrión et al., 2020; Gómez-González, 2014; Villardón-Gallego et al., 2018). Learning and the improvement of coexistence are intimately related aspects in DLGs.

The intersubjective process of dialogue that is built among diverse people facilitates the reading of works of the highest literary level, which would be difficult to access alone without the solidarity support and commitment of the group (Serrano et al., 2010). This process also contributes to the development of attitudes of support, collaboration, solidarity and empathy. During the preparation of the DLG, situations occur in which opportunities for help among peers with different development of reading skills are optimized, sharing learning processes and favoring cultural intelligence within a space that emphasizes diversity as a value and opportunity for the development of all people through communicative interaction (Ramis & Krastina, 2010). In the DLG, all participants are conceived as social agents of transformation (Way et al., 2015) sharing different points of view without the interpretative hierarchy that differentiates between people with or without academic training. This climate of learning, equality and solidarity, brings out the best feelings and its impact is transferred to other socialization contexts such as the family or peer group demonstrating the potential of dialogic reading for overcoming socio-educational inequalities and that culture, if shared and dialogued, has no limits (Burgués, 2019).

3.3. Support networks for social improvement

In the educational field, some accounts demonstrate the breaking of the stereotype that universal classical works only belong to the cultural elite (Ruiz-Eugenio, 2015, 899); the recovery of brightness in affective life (Roca et al., 2015, 848) and the impact of this transformation on teachers' movements for the democratization of educational success in school settings (Fernández, 2015; Roca, 2015); the overcoming of bullying (Aubert, 2015) and of socio-educational exclusion processes (Aubert, 2015; Elboj, 2015; Molina, 2015) and the recovery of academic aspirations in schools in rural environments (García-Carrión, 2015); or the empowerment of immigrant mothers who actively participate in schools and break gender and ethnic stereotypes (Serradell, 2015). Other life stories reflect the overcoming of racist prejudices and different forms of exclusion faced by the Roma community (Aubert, 2015; Munté, 2015). Dialogic reading has also been implemented in contexts of greater risk of social exclusion, evidencing the conquest of hope of homeless women (Racionero-Plaza, 2015), the recovery of academic aspirations of female inmates in penitentiary centers (Pulido, 2015) or the overcoming of barriers to social participation through the narrative of an ex-convict who becomes a spokesperson for his neighborhood with various public administrations to achieve social improvements within his community (Melgar, 2015, 872). Also at the community level, other studies explain the transformation processes that, through participation in DLGs, have made possible the recovery of the sense of democratic (Pulido-Rodríguez et al., 2015) and feminist struggle (Duque, 2015).

Our study contributes to an emerging body of research on the implementation of DLGs in out-of-home care. A previous study by García-Yeste et al. (2017) revealed positive impacts of a five-week intervention of DLGs in a children residential care, but more evidence on this specific environment is needed. This way, our findings contribute to research on successful actions on improving school academic performance among children in alternative care.

4. Methods

This study has a qualitative design and its purpose is to analyze how the implementation of the DLGs in a group of adolescents in out-of-home care contributed to increasing their academic expectations and their educational inequalities. It is a follow-up of a study, which was part of a larger project that ran from 2018 to the present, aimed at implementing SEAs in this context to overcome the violence impacts affecting adolescents in this group home. The intervention described in this study took place from February to November 2019 with the aims of (1) increasing the expectations of the socio-educational success of these adolescents by influencing the academic dimension of DLGs, (2) improving their academic performance after the intervention, and (3) promoting transformations in the environment and institutional care based on research evidence for the improvement of coexistence. The choice of methodological design is a decisive factor when the research pretends to overcome inequalities. Indeed, in order to increase the social impact

of research, we employ the Communicative Methodology (CM). This approach implies the involvement of the studied participants in the research through an egalitarian dialogue, which encourages them to promote and be part of changes in their environment (Gómez et al., 2019). Under this research methodology, an egalitarian dialogue between the researcher and the participant is fostered. The result is a meaningful conversation that allows a deep reflection on individual experiences through the dialogues suggested by each book and in which the researcher also provides scientific evidence. This process of reading and inter-subjective dialogue enhances the collective construction of knowledge, personal transformation and group cohesion.

4.1. Case study

Group homes are one type of residential protection system that can hold from 1 to 10 or more residents, allowing them to attend school, to work, or to keep in touch with the community and, if possible, with their families (Huang et al., 2017). The group home engaged in this study is aimed at including minors and adolescents in cases of serious family lack of protection with a declaration of abandonment. Its purpose is to offer a safe and stable living space with an educational intervention for the development of the necessary skills for their autonomy and emancipation. It is a single-sex resource, only for girls between 13 and 18 years old. Exceptionally, the stay can be extended to 21 years old, if a girl wants to do so and in order to complete her studies in a protected environment and obtain economic savings to become independent. However, the study involved 7 social workers and 13 adolescents between 15-18 years old living in the group home at the time of the intervention. Only 4 of them were in mainstream education, 5 girls had already been referred to ability groups of low academic level within their schools (streaming) and 4 girls had already started vocational training itineraries (see more details in Table 1).

Table 1. Profiles of participants at time of the research

Pseudonym	Age	Academic background
Lara	15	Vocational training (Commercial services)
Melisa	16	Ability group in mainstream Secondary School
Ana	17	Ability group in an institution for disabilities
Sara	16	Mainstream Secondary School
Karen	18	Vocational training (Aesthetics and beauty)
Paula	15	Ability group in mainstream Secondary School
Irene	17	Mainstream Secondary School
Blanca	18	Vocational training (Administrative management)
Amelia	18	Secondary School
Marina	15	Ability group in mainstream Secondary School
Mónica	15	Mainstream Secondary School
Teresa	17	Vocational training (Hairdressing)
Selma	16	Ability group in mainstream Secondary School

For the implementation of DLG, an initial session has been organized to discuss the principles of dialogic learning to be maintained during the activity. At the first gathering, the group discussed their common interests and based on them, they chose the first book, set a time frame of two hours for each DLG, and a monthly frequency to share meanings and reflections with a dialogic learning approach. It was also agreed that a social worker would be the moderator of each DLG. She participated in the same way as the other participants, although her role is also to ensure equal participation of all the people in each DLG by taking turns to speak and always giving priority to those who had spoken the least. This ensured egalitarian dialogue and avoided the confrontation of ideas. Therefore, all the arguments and shared experiences arising from the reading of a literary work can coexist without conflict as long as they do not oppose human rights. A specific moment was also kept each time it takes place any new incorporation in the group, so the adolescents are able to explain the procedure to participate in DLGs and the importance of respecting its principles for proper functioning. In a DLG, under the principles of solidarity and equality of differences, all the resources required to facilitate access to quality literature are mobilized. On the one hand, the reading of each book was split into as many parts and sessions as the group considered. On the other hand, support groups were organized for those who had greater reading difficulties, in order to help read and understand the chapters chosen for each DLG and to prepare in writing their spoken intervention.

For the book selection, social workers provided the group with an extensive list of books based on their literary quality universally recognized. The participants chose three classic books from the universal literature to share together in DLGs, including social workers. In keeping with the high expectations of these adolescents, in all cases the original versions were read and never simplified adaptations.

The choice to first read "The house of Bernarda Alba", by the Spanish writer Federico García Lorca, was driven by the identification that spontaneously occurred linking the general context in which the piece is set with the present history of themselves living in a group home. They wanted to know the story of a group of women who live together "locked" inside a house.

The choice to share the reading of William Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet" emerged from a dialogue in which one adolescent joined the DLGs in the last sessions of Lorca's book and questioned why we read this type of "rare and difficult" books. In line with the CM, to the arguments developed by the adolescents, the researcher contributed the advances of research work on brain neuroimaging published in the journal "Cortex". Thus, it was argued how in that article it is shown that reading Shakespeare triggers a "storm" of neural connections caused by how he used words, for example, using nouns as verbs, and that this feature caused a significant activation in the brain beyond the regions classically activated by typical language tasks (Keidel et al., 2013). Since this effect on cognition does not occur with the reading of works of low literary quality, the reflections arising from this knowledge were directed to argue that they also wanted such a "storm" in their brains and that DLGs were the key to be able to access these "difficult books" together.

In August 2019, the reading of "Romeo and Juliet" was completed, and it was decided to start in September with "The metamorphosis" by Franz Kafka. The choice was made when the adolescents reviewed other

titles in the collection. Other titles such as “Jane Eyre” by Charlotte Brontë, “A Christmas carol” by Charles Dickens, “Romancero gitano” by Lorca, or “A room of one's own” by Virginia Woolf were discussed. “The metamorphosis” was chosen because the title was “mysterious” and at the same time suggestive. Other arguments focused on the attractiveness of reading “Kafka” as an opportunity to “stand out” socially.

4.2. Data collection

Data were collected at the beginning and end of the 2018-2019, 2019-2020, and 2021-2021 school years. This was conducted in the months of December and June of each year. The data collection included contributions from both adolescents and their social workers. This allowed to triangulate the information among all the participants and with the school grades of the adolescents, in order to verify the increase in expectations and academic results and the transformations in the group home. The following data collection methods were used.

4.2.1. Observations

Each meeting of DLGs -9 sessions- was recorded and later transcribed verbatim. This process was completed with observations in a field diary.

4.2.2. Communicative focus groups

Communicative focus groups allow us to confront individual and collective subjectivity. This leads to a deeper understanding of the subject of study. A focus group was conducted with 5 adolescents who fulfilled one criterion: they had attended more than half of the sessions. This is relevant, because sometimes there were girls who finished the protection measure and others who came to the group, and we wanted to know the self-perception of academic competence after frequent and intense participation in the DLG. Topics covered in the focus group were: (1) The type of books, considered to be among the best works of literature, (2) What makes them want to continue reading these books and sharing them on DLGs, (3) If they perceived learning-related changes in themselves, (4) If they perceived changes in themselves related to group home coexistence and socioemotional well-being.

4.2.3. In-depth interviews

Two in-depth interviews were conducted with adolescents and 2 in-depth interviews addressed to social workers on the basis of two criteria in both cases: voluntariness and availability, and participation for a longer period of time in DLGs. Topics covered with social workers: (1) Changes in the environment related to the improvement of the coexistence of girls and social cohesion, and (2) Perceived changes in the girls who live together in the group home. With adolescents, topics covered were perceived improvements in academic learning, oral language development and reading proficiency, and expectations for future studies.

4.2.4. Records of adolescent girls' school grades

Records of adolescent girls' school grades were also collected before and after the intervention. These quantitative data were collected from 2018 to the present, 2021, in order to analyze the academic performance derived from the intervention. This data collection was carried out in two periods: (1) December, coinciding with the first evaluation after one term of the course; and (2) June, together with the final results of each academic year. The process of 5 additional girls who are not longer living in that space was also analyzed for this study. The school grades of the adolescent girls were compiled with the average of the results in each period and recorded in a graphic (see Figure 1).

4.3. Data analysis

For this paper, the information obtained through all the data collection techniques has been triangulated: 9 recorded sessions of DLGs, 1 communicative focus group, 4 in-depth interviews, and observations in a field diary. The data was classified into four connected categories: (1) Self-perceived academic dimension, (2) Pro-social dimension, (3) School results before and after the DLGs. These categories, of a deductive type, were formulated as a result of the review of the scientific literature. First, we considered the self-perceived academic dimension, because the attitudes that students show towards their own learning have a very relevant impact on their academic performance and DLGs can contribute to this (Díez-Palomar et al., 2020). The pro-social dimension includes improved group coexistence, better communication skills for social interaction and greater socioemotional well-being which provides greater security for adolescent within the group home. Finally, school results have been compiled in order to compare records of adolescent girls' school grades were also collected before and after the intervention. In regard to the academic records, we do not compare results between adolescents, but rather analyze how they progress in relation to themselves as they engage in more DLGs sessions. Given the vulnerability of this group, in order to protect their data as much as possible and so that it is not possible to cross-reference them with the information provided in Table 1, the adolescents are identified by a number from 1-13 and a color that describes their academic performance (see Figure 1). This measure allows for maximum anonymization of as much as all data and avoids possible identification between the profiles of participants in Table 1 and their academic achievement progress in Figure 1.

4.4. Ethics statements

In research, dealing with minors is an area that requires extremely careful treatment of both the personal data provided in the study and all the information collected through the different techniques used. This factor is compounded by the fieldwork carried out with a sample of a population that is already vulnerable because they are adolescent minors who, in turn, incorporate family separation measures and who, in several cases,

have suffered or experienced the problem of domestic violence at close hand. In this sense, the personal data collected have been collected, analyzed and stored guaranteeing the security, anonymity and privacy of all participants. Adolescents and social workers in this group home agreed to provide researchers access to relevant data for the purpose of the study. Ethical requirements were addressed following the Code of Ethics from the International Sociological Association (2001), the Ethical Guides from European Sociological Association (2019) and from European Textbook in Ethics of Research (2010). Even though they were adolescents, almost all the participants had not reached the age of majority at the beginning of the research, so in addition to their own written consent, we also obtained the consent of their legal guardians. From our first meeting, we dialogued explicitly about participation in this research being completely free, voluntary, and revocable at any point in the process. Likewise, the purpose and objectives of this research have been shared with all participants since their incorporation. All participants received a report explaining the objectives of the intervention and the research, the ethical code, data protection and the probable publication of results. Both the social workers and the adolescents signed the informed consent for participation. We also informed and obtained the consent of the technicians of the corresponding social services administration responsible for the care or guardianship of the minor girls.

5. Results

The main results obtained through the analysis of the different data collection techniques are presented below in regards to the defined categories.

5.1. Self-perceived academic dimension.

The more instrumental component inherent to the practice of dialogic reading contributes to improving communicative competence through vocabulary increase, training in discursive and argumentative skills, improvement of reading competence and familiarization with academic language; factors that emerge from the scientific literature as predictors of academic success throughout the educational system:

I noticed it in the way I expressed myself at the beginning, it is not the same as it is now, after having read several books (Paula).

I refused, at first, I didn't want to come [laughs]. I was too embarrassed, I'm not one to speak in groups... I'm very reserved! But I liked the way we did it, how we distributed the reading... It wasn't an imposition; we read because we wanted to (Lara).

You learn at the linguistic level, at the level of oral expression, at the level of relating to people and at the cultural level. I think it's a change... (Sara).

All the adolescent girls say that they feel that they have been improving academically day by day since participating in the dialogic discussions. One of them describes this process of increasing academic skills by comparing their progress as if they had gone from “*playing cards*” to learning to “*playing chess*” (Marina).

They're books... Like Shakespeare's, you just read them but it feels like you haven't finished them because when you go back and read a part in the DLG, it's like you learn something new and that's cool like you want to read more (Lara).

On the one hand, the linguistic richness of the chosen books has encouraged intense dialogues in which the children made an effort to try to understand complex concepts or expressions. They finally achieved a precise definition as a result of all the contributions through collective reasoning training. Thus, the definition of words outside their everyday vocabulary such as “yute”, “almirez” or “dramaturgo” was addressed; expressions in disuse such as “cristianar”; or literary figures such as onomatopoeia (“gori gori”), antithesis (“pluma de plomo”) or metaphor (“tiene unos dedos como cinco ganzúas”) were discussed. On the other hand, the beginnings of each literary work or some details during the reading, have promoted reflection on aspects of the historical context. For example, in “Romeo and Juliet”, the young age of Juliet when Capulet wants to force her to marry Count Paris, made them reflect not only on this injustice but also on life expectancy in the sixteenth century (DLG3.1_57:25). “The House of Bernarda Alba” promoted many dialogues about Lorca as a victim of the crimes of Francoism (DLG2.1_8:20) or, during the three gatherings about the play, about the Spanish society of the time in relation to the subordinate role of women or customs far from their everyday life such as mourning, contrasting all these aspects with their knowledge on the subject today.

Some adolescents talked about classic titles that they had heard about and therefore wanted to read. This desire is fulfilled with the support of the DLG (L, GDC2_4:28). Socialization also affects our reading preferences, so both good and bad taste in this regard is educated. This opportunity of immersion in some of the best works of world literature has made all the participants, both adolescents and social workers, acquire the habit of reading, and they have overcome previous prejudices about these books after their participation in the DLGs.

Many times, we also have a lot of prejudices when it comes to reading books like “The House of Bernarda Alba”, for example, and I loved it! (Social worker 7).

I thought it was going to be boring, but... these books bring out conversation and it was more fun than I thought it was going to be. I didn't use to read anything (Amelia).

For me reading this makes me excited, I feel smart! (Paula).

Reading classic literature books also helps them to demystify all that... It happened to me too, I thought that reading a classic book was super difficult (Social worker 1).

I had never read a classic! I think like most people... I liked it a lot, it makes you think, you get something productive out of it, something that will be worthwhile... I thought it was really cool and I enjoyed reading something I thought I wouldn't (Lara).

In the instrumental dimension of learning, we also include the recovery of academic aspirations on the part of adolescent girls and high expectations of their educational performance on the part of social workers, since these are factors that the scientific literature establishes as key to overcoming the risk of social exclusion:

You feel very intellectual. I would pull out the book, I remember... I would pull it out on the bus and start reading and everyone was looking at me as if they were saying: "Oh, she's interesting!". That's cool. I trust myself a lot now, in things like studying, working... Working and studying are things that you have to put yourself into and that helps you, if not, they're not going to happen. To keep studying, I want to keep studying for many years to come (Lara).

5.2. Pro-social dimension.

Instrumental learning and the improvement of coexistence are elements that are linked to the practice of dialogic reading. On the one hand, through compliance with the principles of dialogic learning. On the other hand, because the best literary works, in addition to their high academic component, address in great depth the ethical dimension of human beings and their most universal concerns.

For some participants, increasing their communicative competence in the dialogic gatherings and having this space reserved for dialogue together has not only meant (1) overcoming the inhibition of speaking in public and (2) improving their relationships, their social skills, and acquiring greater confidence among themselves:

It has also helped me a lot to communicate, to be less embarrassed to speak (...). Also, for example, there are very quiet people here, who had never heard them talk much, and in the DLGs is where they let themselves go because they had to talk, let's say. And the egalitarian dialogue, that is... the one who talks a little or the one who talks a lot, we talked the same (Lara).

It generates more confidence because giving your point of view about what you think about a topic in front of many people, it's like... It's like you have a brake. But as you speak, you start to get more confidence and freedom to talk about whatever you want, and I think that has helped us a lot (...). The DLGs have made us start to open up and have resulted in us having these conversations among ourselves to help (...). Conversations have taken place outside of the DLGs that have taken place inside the DLGs. They do not stay inside, I mean, but they move outside (Sara).

Some adolescents identify that coexistence, before the DLGs, "was chaotic" (Paula) or that these spaces have helped them to think before acting impulsively, to get to know and empathize more among themselves or to increase the cohesion of the group:

Before, for example, if you said something to me and I didn't like it... I would respond badly, I would get angry, I would hit you and now... I think about it more and I don't hit things or anything (Paula).

I think that now, in our group home, we respect each other a lot, we are much more supportive and we have companionship when we need it (...). I don't know, you are bad and it shows, obviously... Like this one [points to Mónica], who is an open book and you can always tell when she is bad and now Paula and I are going to see what's wrong with her (...). It's a way of getting to know each other. It's not that they have told me and I know their whole life, but you realize what people are like by how they talk, how they express themselves... I think that's good, it's a way of getting to know each other. I have gotten to know people better and, for example, I know that if I say something I am going to hurt that person because I think about it before I say it (...). It is good to know something about each person because we are living together (Lara).

These comments also coincide with the social workers' perception of improved relations among them:

Yes, it does serve for them to get to know each other better, to understand each other, to understand also certain problems or certain ways of reacting to something because of personal things that they tell in the DLGs or experiences that otherwise, they would not have known about other peers (Social worker 1).

5.3. School results before and after the DLGs

Contributing to the successful completion of the protection measure, redirecting their personal situations and overcoming educational inequality are also factors that we contemplate in the DLGs. In this sense, promoting the creation of references among them is a key factor in generating support and expectations for a more hopeful future:

As in the DLGs they see and feel as equals (...), they begin to think that it is not something they cannot Access [higher education]. In addition, this also has a contagious effect and they say: "Well, if you can go [to university], so can I" or "If we share this, these same ideas and agree on the same things [in similar lives], why shouldn't I be able to go to university, like you?". They need to have more support, but the DLGs are a way for them to see that they can also do it (Social worker 1).

Sometimes I don't realize it, but I do (...). To Ana I helped her to read (...), to Melisa I was helping her with homework and with the recovery of some exams and I taught her some tricks that, even now she tells me: "I still use them!" (Sara).

DLGs are identified as a resource that can contribute to generating more referents to overcome many of the inequalities that these minors share:

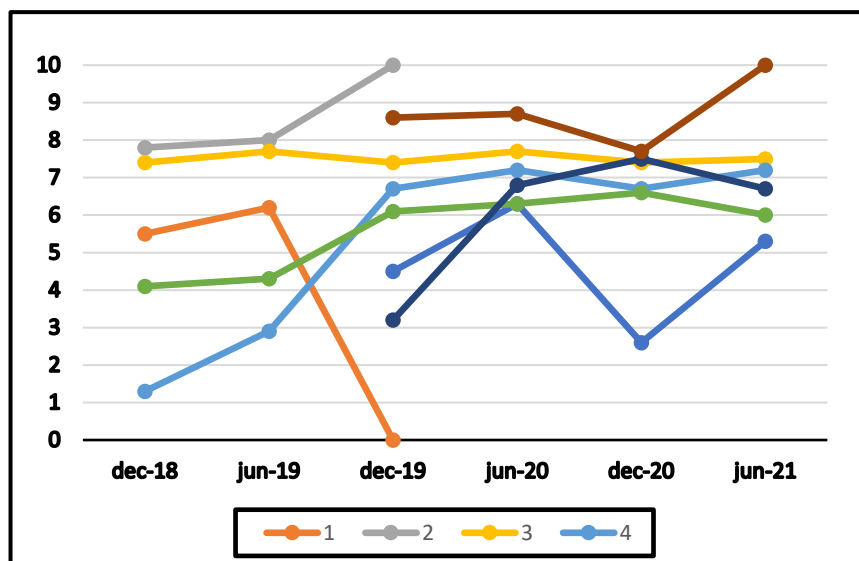
For example, the other day I was talking about it with Selma because she believed that she could not do high school. The DLGs, not only at the academic level but also in terms of empowerment (...). Those aspects grow a lot. I remember situations like those of Ana or Karen who had lived very hard situations and who have begun to empower themselves as a result of the DLGs (Sara).

Social workers also identify that DLGs have contributed to increased academic aspirations compared to previous groups where they were not implemented:

Before DLGs, groups were not as motivated to study. Never before had all the teenage girls in a group passed all the subjects and with such good grades and expectations to go to university. Before the DLGs they didn't talk about that, they all used to study hairdressing or things like that. It's not that they had a vocation, it's that they all chose it because they thought there were no other options for them.... We didn't realize that, we didn't think about it.... (Social worker 1).

This is reflected in the academic performance before and after the intervention in Figure 1, values correspond to their average grades during each period. Subsequently, we added two values where 0 meant school dropout and 10 meant access to university.

Figure 1. Academic achievement progress



Five of the adolescents were excluded from this analysis, of whom we were only able to record one data point because they subsequently left the group home. In all five cases, living the group home automatically caused them to drop out of school, without starting the following school year. This is a very relevant finding, given that scientific literature identifies low academic level and early school dropout as barriers associated with prolonged stays in out-of-home care. However, in this case, it is revealed that the prolonged stay in this group home is precisely a favorable factor for academic achievement and for eradicating early school dropout. This is confirmed too by the results of “Adolescent 1” (see Figure 1, orange line) who, during her stay in the group home, evolves favorably. However, when she leaves the resource in the summer of 2019, she also abandons her studies, which she does not start when she should have started in September 2019.

We have seen that we have almost always had... that the profile of girls was always directed to Vocational Training... Their academic aspirations were cut off because of the rush, in quotation marks, of having to do everything very quickly: find a job, become independent... and it is very difficult for them to prioritize academic training and they don't have people behind them to support them and encourage them to continue (...). In the thirteen years that I have been working here, only two went to university afterwards. Now, with DLGs, we have three girls who are going to go to university with us, that had not happened until now and we want that to happen more (Social worker 1).

The third girl who has acceded university studies referred to by Social Worker 1 in this statement does not appear in Figure 1, as she accessed the group home in March 2020, later than the qualitative data collection period described in this paper.

Beyond average grades, what is relevant in this analysis for all adolescent girls is academic progress, protection against early school dropout and increased chances of Access to university studies, which is accelerating compared to pre-intervention periods.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Since its beginnings at the Adult School of La Verneda-Sant Martí (Sánchez-Aroca, 1999) and, subsequently, since the scientific and social impact of the European R&D Project INCLUD-ED (2006-2011), the scientific literature has continued to demonstrate solid evidence of the transformative component of DLGs to address global challenges in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2000, 2015) and the objectives of the European Union (EU, 2011), especially in the educational field (Flecha, 2015).

The aim of this study is to contribute to overcoming educational inequality through the implementation of DLG in an out-of-home care context. The results obtained are in line with other previous works that show the impact of DLGs on cognitive and language development, as well as on the attitudes towards learning (Díez-Palomar et al., 2020; García-Yeste et al., 2017; García-Carrión et al., 2020). This action allows increasing vocabulary and reading comprehension, argumentative and discursive skills (Avci & Yüksel, 2011; Goldman, 2012; López de Aguilera, 2019). The academic dimension of learning and the motivation to read some of the best works of the world literature have been results identified in the research process and, moreover, as perceived by the participants themselves. They have shown enormous motivation for reading, expressing their desire to read more and to continue sharing, in the DLGs, the greatest works of world literature, so that, before finishing a book, they are already deciding on the next one. This enthusiasm is transferred and spreads to the adolescents who have arrived later to the group home when their own peers encourage them to start, advise and explain to them how it works and why we created this DLG. Our study corroborates that there is no scientific contribution that can argue against the fact that any person is capable, if he or she has the will and a network of social support, of accessing the greatest literary contributions of humanity without language or any individual difference or difficulty acting as a barrier. Until the participation in the DLGs, most of these adolescents recognized that they were extremely unmotivated towards reading, had never read a whole book before, or had limited themselves to reading fragments of different texts in the context of school assignments or fashionable best-sellers of zero literary quality and high doses of violence. For the first time, all of them have passed with good grades (see Figure 1 and the previous intervention of the social worker 1), two of them have started university studies, and we talked together a lot about the importance of obtaining higher education to be able to enjoy, in the future, greater opportunities to choose what kind of life we want. One of them said that it was the first time someone had asked her: *“What career*

do you want to study?". Placing this dream on the horizon and offering support in moving toward it will increase the chances of achieving it.

The scientific literature on the impact of institutionalization also highlights the importance of the quantity and quality of interactions that social workers provide. Stability of care and attention is also important in improving well-being and reducing behavioral problems. The educational actions that social workers implement in the group home influence both the behavior during the institutionalization experience and the impact on their later life trajectory (Bell et al., 2015). All the scientific evidence on the improvement interventions from the institutional environment was transferred to the social workers of the supervised apartment under study. So, having an impact on the improvement of professional education and training in the field of social work to improve the educational outcomes of institutionalized minors is a measure to be considered to reduce the risk of educational and social exclusion.

6.1. Strengths and limitations

The study offers an analysis of the impact of the implementation of DLGs on overcoming educational inequalities in out-of-home care. It concerns a highly relevant context, as it has been little studied so far. However, the research is not exempt from limitations. First, since this is a case study with a limited sample, it offers much richness for analysis, but the results cannot be generalized. The implementation of DLGs and other SEAs in out-of-home care environments is a relatively recent line of research that needs to be further explored. Our research also focuses on parameters that are difficult to measure. Although it cannot be affirmed that the dialogic interactions established in DLGs through access to the best works of world literature are the only factors that contribute to these impacts, they are reflected as essential in this research and in the results of the literature review carried out. This intervention contributes to improving the future expectations of adolescent girls. The DLGs are increasing their communicative competence, one of the most important skills for successful development in today's information society. On the other hand, their more human dimension generates this self-perception of competence, which is giving them greater security when facing everyday situations. The belief in a positive future is also linked to the increase in expectations about their future that their social workers are projecting on them, increasing the quantity and quality of interactions, dialoguing more frequently about a university forthcoming, or organizing more available time to support them in their academic tasks. Education is essential for every individual to succeed in life and the relevance of educational level is widely documented as the most influential factor in preventing the risk of social exclusion. The large body of research, in increasingly diverse contexts, consolidates dialogic reading spaces as sociocultural tools for overcoming inequalities and represents a key opportunity to break down the barriers that prevent the most vulnerable population from developing a taste for quality reading and benefiting from the universal literary heritage that is frequently denied them. This qualitative study with a communicative orientation includes the voices of the participating children as active subjects of their own personal transformation in different areas of learning and socioemotional development and provides further

evidence on how research can contribute to improve social realities that are often invisible, through interventions that bring together science and the best feelings, dreams and utopias.

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