

## **Dialogic literary gatherings and out-of-home child care: creation of new meanings through classic literature**

### **Abstract**

Research on out-of-home child care has revealed that foster care programmes focused on educational attainment and reading have the potential to improve the academic outcomes of children in care. However, no studies have examined which elements of these programmes positively benefit children's emotional well-being. This article presents evidence of the positive effects of implementing a successful educational action, dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs), in a children's residential care institution. A qualitative study using a communicative-oriented methodology was conducted and involved five participant observations and eight daily life stories with children in out-of-home care in Catalonia (Spain). The children's reflections demonstrated that reading classic books, such as Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, deeply influenced their feelings and self-conceptions and created new and exciting meaning in their lives.

**Keywords:** dialogic literary gatherings, out-of-home child care, classic literature, emotional well-being, academic skills

## Introduction

A significant amount of research focuses on the disadvantageous situations that some children face around the world that renders them vulnerable (Lee, 2016; Berens & Nelson, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006; Bradshaw & Main, 2016). These disadvantageous situations are commonly associated with a lack of protection of children's rights. Such a lack of protection leads these children to suffer severe problems like a low probability of completing their education, poor health, difficulty finding a job as an adult, an elevated risk of being trafficked for forced labour, etc. (Silvano da Silva, de Lima, Rios, & Rolim, 2016). In this regard, European data regarding children who are suffering from inequality confirm that their vulnerability has increased in recent years because of the financial crisis and the impossibility of guaranteeing quality child care (European Commission, 2010; Save the Children, 2014). Some investigations have stressed that frequently, these difficulties become even worse when minors live in institutional care. When children live in institutions, the likelihood that their rights will not be respected increases exponentially (Hermenau, Hecker, Elber and Ruf- Leuschner, 2014).

In Spain, it is estimated that approximately 13,700 minors live under institutional supervision. There are several causes of institutionalisation, including family disintegration, abuse in families of origin, violence in family homes, lack of social support systems, and poor social and economic conditions (Berens & Nelson, 2015; Pinheiro, 2006). The current article presents some insights into these causes and the effects of this institutionalisation on children although institutionalisation is not the primary focus of this analysis. This paper examines the positive impact of implementing a particular intervention in a residential care institution to overcome this spiral of inequality. This intervention is called Dialogic Literary Gatherings, a dialogic reading activity based on two principles: reading a classical work of literature (in our case, Dickens' *Oliver Twist*) and then sharing meanings, interpretations and reflections using the dialogic learning methodology (Racionero and Valls, 2007).

This article is divided into five sections. First, a section addresses investigations that analyse some of the most important disadvantages that children who are in institutional care encounter. The next section presents various details regarding the current situation in Spain regarding this matter. The third section focuses on explaining the functioning of the Dialogic Literary Gatherings. The fourth section describes the

primary basis of the research methodology employed, and the final section presents the findings of our investigation.

### **Disadvantages of children in institutional care**

Research on minors who live in institutional care have demonstrated that children's rights and needs are not often holistically addressed, which causes these children to be seriously disadvantaged (Silvano da Silva, de Lima, Rios, & Rolim, 2016). None of these analyses deeply explored whether there are connections between children's original situation before living in care institutions and later; however, these studies did provide relevant information regarding how these children address difficulties to develop successful life trajectories. This section addresses some of these barriers, and the findings section will explain how DLGs are contributing to reducing this negative impact. These barriers include school failure and early school leaving, violence, health risks and poor emotional well-being.

#### *School failure and premature school leaving*

Two of the primary risks suffered by children living in institutional care are school failure and premature school leaving, corroborated by data from various countries. For example, in the United Kingdom, only 14% of children in institutional care complete compulsory secondary education (Jackson & Cameron, 2015). This statistic is particularly worrisome because even non-care students from ethnic minorities and low socio-economic backgrounds perform better and do not abandon school (Fangen, Johanson & Hammaren, 2011). In Sweden, 14% of Swedish children in care do not complete compulsory education either (Höjer & Johansson, 2010; Montserrat, Casas, & Baena, 2015). Both countries allocate significant amounts of public and private money to education and children's care, an important variable to consider (OECD, 2013, 2014; Evertsson, 2014). Recent studies, however, have reported that economic resources invested in education and care are not the only explanation for changes in these areas; practices and actions that are implemented are also beneficial (Rios, 2013; Flecha et al., 2015).

The data focused on access to higher education also illustrate the persistence of the disadvantaged situation of young people in institutional care. This persistence can be observed in countries such as the United States in which only 2.7% of the former foster

care population between the ages of 25 and 33 years complete secondary education compared with 24.4% of the general population, and only 11.1% enrol in college (Pecora et al., 2006). Similar results were identified in Denmark in which only 7.3% of the former care population reached higher education (Jackson, & Cameron, 2015).

The data presented above illustrate a reality that should be approached with particular attention. Although it is true that it is quite difficult to establish inferences regarding the origin of the inequalities that children and youth in institutional care face, those children are not experiencing positive effects with regard to educational attainment. This reality is radically opposite to the European recommendations in this field. In fact, the Europe 2020 strategy established priority targets for this topic by 2020: the proportion of early school leavers should be less than 10%, and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree (European Commission, 2010). Therefore, it is necessary to take steps to guarantee that institutional care move confidently to reach these objectives.

#### *Violence and health risks*

Several studies have demonstrated that children living in residential homes face various risks directly connected to their health and well-being. Some of these risks involve alcohol and drug abuse (von Borczyskowski, Vinnerjung, & Hiern, 2013; Vinnerljung, & Hiern, 2011; Traube, James, Zhang, & Landsverk, 2012; Cheng, & Lo, 2010) and physical and psychological violence such as isolation, insecure attachment, beating, hitting children's heads against the wall and locking the children in freezing rooms. Regarding the latter, investigations concluded that such violence may be perpetrated by both residential workers in institutional care centres and other children living in that type of organization. Thus, it becomes more difficult to develop defences against this violence in residential care centres because some protective factors are quite often not present in those places, such as secure attachment, paternal care during childhood and supportive relationships with peers (Berens & Nelson, 2015; UN General Assembly, 2006).

Other analyses reported certain negative effects linked to violent behaviours or unhealthy practices. For example, a study conducted in Russia concluded that one in three institutionalised children becomes homeless, one in five commits a felony, and

one in ten takes his own life. In the same vein, a study in the Republic of Moldavia revealed that institutionalised children are over-represented in human trafficking, and shocking data from Northern Ireland reported a considerable proportion of these young people in the justice system: approximately 70% had been in institutional care (Pinheiro, 2006).

Additionally, research has also identified the risk of early pregnancy, with the subsequent dangers of maternal and infant mortality (Delap, 2010). When considering girls in particular, these studies indicated that pregnancy among foster care youth was significantly higher than among the general adolescent population (Oshima, Narendorf, & McMillen, 2013).

### *Emotional well-being*

Living in care negatively affects children's emotional well-being, self-concept and behaviour, which is corroborated by the scientific literature. For example, several studies demonstrated how children and adolescents exhibited high rates of traumatic symptoms (Fischer, Dölitzsch, Schmeck, Fegert, & Schmid, 2016). Berens and Nelson (2015) provided evidence of some harmful effects caused by institutionalisation in minors, such as extreme emotional over-exuberance, nervous excitement, silliness, coyness, hyperactivity, cognitive delay, indiscriminate friendliness, quasi-autistic behaviours, and excessive playfulness with parents and strangers alike.

Other analyses introduced different effects on these children such as higher levels of internalising and psychopathological manifestation, psychiatric morbidity and Attention Deficit Disorder (Silvano da Silva, de Lima, Rios, & Rolim, 2016). Generally, studies were consistent in concluding that some of the factors that may foster these emotional, mental health and behaviour-related problems may include the loss of a bond that generates security at an early age and lack of attention from adults. Consequently, it becomes quite difficult for children and adolescents to create lasting bonds with other caregivers or educators, which generates negative effects at the cognitive, intellectual and emotional levels (Browne, 2009; Delap, 2010). Thus, there is a general consensus that long-term (and even short-term) foster care in foster institutions is harmful to children because of the difficulty these children experience in creating trust and safety bonds with adults (both men and women) and other children and adolescents in a care centre, which may lead to inactivity and social isolation (Delap, 2010; Delap, 2013;

Pinheiro, 2006). Notably, early parental deprivation has been demonstrated to be equivalent to violence against a child. Pinheiro (2006) confirmed that the period of time that children are in institutional care may be associated with a loss of basic skills that children possessed before entering a centre, a decline in children's ability to look after themselves and an inability to develop caring relationships.

Every disadvantage described thus far (in addition to others suffered by children) derives from the dynamics of the children's biological families combined with the children's experiences in out-of-home placements, which in some cases are also negative. Various studies demonstrated how these disadvantages may be mitigated by interventions that contribute to achieving a high level of education and high-quality education (Jackson, 2001; Jackson & Cameron, 2015).

### **The Spanish context**

In Spain, 14,000 children and youth currently live in residential homes for minors, and 10,000 are under six years of age. An additional 19,000 minors are in state care but are not in foster care centres; in fact, the majority of this group live with extended family, and 20% live with foster families (Díaz, 2015). Particularly in Catalonia, that is, the area where our study was conducted, nearly 7,000 children and adolescents up to 18 years of age are in the care of the Catalan government. Of these children, 2,685 live in residential care institutions (called residential centres of educational action or assisted flats in the case of older children), 15% live with foster families, and 40% live with other relatives (DGAIA, 2015; IDESCAT, 2014).

In Spain, children who live in out-of-home care institutions often face difficulties on the path to a promising future. For example, a local newspaper recently published an interview with a 20-year-old man who lived in an out-of-home care institution in Barcelona. The young man explained how difficult it was to complete secondary education and find his current precarious job as a domestic worker (Diari Ara, 2014). This man represents one of many examples of young men and women who endeavour to construct a new life upon reaching adulthood. The Spanish government conducted a large study of the educational trajectories of young people who lived in out-of-home care institutions and concluded that a substantial percentage do not achieve the expectations these same young people expressed when planning to leave their out-of-home care institutions. The majority of these young men and women reported facing

difficulties finding a decent job, suffering considerable economic difficulties or having to leave school (Montserrat, Casas & Baena, 2013). At times, such situations may render it difficult for young people to live a decent adult life. Consequently, these young people may also face psychological disorders that challenge their emotional well-being.

Recent research in Spain regarding children in out-of-home care also focused on the educational situation of this group. This research provided data regarding educational outcomes, confirming the importance of addressing education: only 32% of children in care were in the school year corresponding to their age. This inequality persisted in the percentage of students who do not complete compulsory secondary education (ESO): 52% of children in care leave education before finishing this stage (Montserrat, Casas, Baena, 2013; INTRESS & UPSOCIAL, 2015). Similarly, data regarding access to higher education by children in out-of-home care reflected a low presence of these pupils at university. In fact, many of these young people, nearly 50%, were enrolled in initial professional qualification programmes available only to applicants who have not earned a compulsory secondary education degree (Montserrat, Casas & Baena, 2015).

These results demonstrate the difficulties that children in care institutions face in achieving a prosperous future. This article discusses the effects of dialogic literary gatherings (DLGs) in ameliorating these difficulties. Children's comments collected during the field work illustrate how reading and sharing classic literature contribute to deepening some insights into the problems these young people face.

### **Dialogic Literary Gatherings (DLGs) in the social exclusion risk context**

Research has demonstrated that paired reading improves the literacy skills of children in foster care and that this strategy renders the act of reading highly enjoyable for boys and girls (Osborne, Alfano, & Win, 2013; Forsman, 2015). Paired reading has historically been defined as a procedure to accelerate reading based on different stages. First, pupils read aloud and then reread the selected paragraph or section of the text with a less fluent partner or a partner who is at the same level (Morgan & Lyon, 1987). Drawing on this strategy, previous studies noted that this typology of reading improves children's literacy skills (Soler, 2004). DLGs are considered one of the most effective strategies in this area, which was corroborated by a large-scale project of the 6th Framework

Programme of the European Commission called *INCLUD-ED Strategies for Inclusion and Social Cohesion in Europe from Education* (2006-11). INCLUD-ED deeply examined the improvements achieved by several successful educational actions (SEAs) in various social areas, including education, employment, health, housing and social and political participation. These actions were defined as interventions based on scientific evidence that enabled social transformation and social impact regardless of the context in which the interventions were applied (Flecha, Soler & Sordé, 2015; Redondo-Sama, 2016; Ríos, 2013). DLG is achieving positive results in the educational area in two particular dimensions: 1) improving instrumental learning and coexistence and 2) improving the emotional well-being of the participants.

Notably the present debate on scientific evidence and the application of evidence-based practice (EBP) in social work (Pepping, Dawe, Harnett, 2016; Avby, Nilsen, Ellström, 2016; Webb, 2001) and other intervention spheres (Wandersman et al., 2008) demonstrates that successful educational actions such as DLGs have become an effective tool for professionals implementing evidence-based interventions. Thus, the gap between practise and investigation in social work is narrowing (Rubin, 2014), and it is safe to respond to the needs of children in care using evidence-based interventions. Therefore, DLGs eschew the exclusive notions that affirm that certain groups cannot understand or are not interested in cultural matters; in fact, the egalitarian dialogue environment of a DLG enables people of different backgrounds and origins to articulate and share their personal situations and feelings. Thus, by expressing their interpretation of the meaning of reality, each participant becomes a transformative agent of their own reality (García-Carrión, 2015).

The role of the moderator is crucial in this transformative process because the moderator is responsible for monitoring children's interests and needs. The moderator opens the floor to a participant who reads a paragraph aloud and explains why that passage was selected; the floor is then opened to other participants to discuss the selected paragraph. The same procedure is repeated with each passage selected by each participant. Every contribution is equally valued in an egalitarian dialogue that fosters the critical awareness of the participants, leading to personal transformation and emancipation (Freire, 2007; Lynch, 2016).

Recent investigations corroborated the transformative effects of DLGs in various contexts, particularly in these neighbourhoods characterized by social exclusion (Flecha, Garcia, & Gómez, 2013; García-Carrión, 2015; De Boton, Girbés, Ruíz, &



Tellado, 2014; Alvarez, García-Carrión, Puigvert, Pulido, and Schubert, 2016). This article continues this line of research by providing unprecedented knowledge regarding the effects of DLG in out-of-home child care, including improvements in children's relationships, self-perception and emotional well-being. The voices of the participating children are included to illustrate these effects.

## **Method**

The purpose of this research was to demonstrate how participation in a DLG benefits the academic skills, emotional condition and well-being of children and adolescents in foster homes. To accomplish this objective, we adopted a communicative orientation to promote the creation of evidence-based scientific knowledge by interactions among participants. The premise of the communicative orientation was that people are actors capable of developing reflexive interpretations and creating knowledge regarding their own social reality. Therefore, communicative orientation overcomes the interpretative gap between the researcher and the participants because the researcher contributes to the research with scientific knowledge and the participants provide experience-based knowledge via an egalitarian dialogue. Thus, we ensure that the results have a considerable social impact on the improvement of the topic under investigation and simultaneously break down potential classist or racist biases or biases of any other type (Gomez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011). The final goal of the communicative orientation is to contribute to the improvement of the reality under study, which in this case is the lives of children and adolescents in foster care.

### *Case study design*

The DGL that was studied was implemented in a residential centre of educational action in Catalonia. We recruited boys and girls from 12 to 17 years of age with different reading levels but with sufficient comprehension skills to understand and share the contents of the book ultimately selected. However, some of the residential workers offered reading support during the week, particularly to the boys and girls who experienced greater difficulties with reading. The book selected was Dickens' *Oliver Twist*, chosen by the administrators of the residential centre and the boys and girls. Because interest in participating in the activity was prioritised, the participants were free to attend or not as they wished. The minors involved in the gathering were a natural

group because the group composed all of the adolescents who were living at the foster centre during DLG implementation.

After the book was selected, the adolescents were informed of the research by one of the members of the investigation team. The participants signed consent forms to participate that assured the adolescents of the confidentiality of their personal data. These consent forms were distributed to legal tutors from the foster care centre and the adolescents; therefore ethical principles were prioritized with the data collection process.

The DLGs were held during five sessions over five consecutive weeks; each session lasted one hour. The final sample composed the 12 adolescents who participated in all of the sessions. The moderator who conducted the DLG was an employee of the centre as well as a member of the research team. Table 1 presents the various profiles of the minors, providing relevant socio-economic information regarding their backgrounds. Notably, despite the existing diversity, intersectionality influenced these children's lives but not the involvement and effects of their participation in the DLG.

*Table 1. Profiles of participants in the research*

Pseudonym	Age	Race/Country of Origin	Educational Level	Personal Background
Alberto	16	Argentinian	Vocational Training	Relatives with histories of prostitution and drug abuse
Marta	16	Spanish non-Roma	Upper Secondary	Relatives with histories of prostitution and drug abuse
Jovita	17	Spanish Roma	Occupational Training	Negligent relatives with a history of sexual abuse
Carlos	16	Ivory Coast	Secondary	Undocumented migrant minor
Rosa	13	Spanish Roma	Secondary	Negligent father
Quilian	14	Spanish non-Roma	Secondary	No information
Tania	16	Spanish Roma	Vocational Training	Relatives with histories of alcohol abuse
Laura	15	Romanian Roma	Secondary	Undocumented migrant minor who was homeless
Roca	15	Spanish Roma	Secondary	Relatives with histories of alcohol abuse and poor mental health
Manuel	14	Spanish Roma	Secondary	Negligent father
Alan	15	Spanish Roma	Secondary	Negligent father
Irene	17	Roma	Secondary	No information
Martí	14	Spanish non-Roma	Special Education	Negligent relatives
Abel	15	Spanish non-Roma	Secondary	Relatives with histories of prostitution, drug abuse and sexual abuse of children

### *Data collection*

The current study was conducted in the selected centre during the 2014-15 school year. The person who performed the field work was also the residential worker who chaired the literary gatherings. This situation helped to promote greater spontaneity both in the scheduling of the DLGs and in the data collection procedure. Two data collection techniques were employed: participant observations and semi-structured interviews. Five sessions of participation observation were conducted during the implementation of the DLGs and, in some cases, while the participants read and prepared for a gathering. These sessions were audio-recorded to collect information on the debates with maximum trustworthiness.

At the end of the scheduled sessions of DLGs in June 2015, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant of the DLG: 6 boys and 6 girls (n=12). These interviews were conducted to complement the data collected in the participant observations and to collect the children's voices. The researchers organized meetings with minors on different days; all participants had previously filled out the informed consent form. The questions formulated for the interviews primarily focused on four elements that were strongly connected with previous research on interventions in children in institutional care, such as educational achievement and emotional well-being (Jackson & Cameron, 2015; Fangen, Johanson & Hammaren, 2011; Berens & Nelson, 2015). The four selected aspects were as follows:

- Group relationships
- Empathy and the ability to get to know the other participants
- A respectful and safe environment
- Academic skills

### *Data analysis*

To perform the data analysis, reflections shared during the semi-structured interviews and the dialogues collected during the participant observations were transcribed literally to study the content of the children's quotations. All of the transcripts and notes were codified considering two premises: the communicative orientation and the abovementioned theoretical concepts, which were derived from previous scientific literature (See Table 2). Drawing on this categorization, the data collected were studied beginning with exclusionary and transformative dimensions. The first dimensions were

the barriers the students were required to overcome to obtain specific social benefits; the second dimensions were the practices and actions that contributed to overcoming those barriers (Gomez, Puigvert & Flecha, 2011).

*Table 2. Codification of data*

<b>Dimensions</b> <b>Categories</b>	<b>Group Relationships</b>	<b>Empathy</b>	<b>Respectful and safe environment</b>	<b>Academic Skills</b>
Exclusionary	1	2	3	4
Transformative	5	6	7	8

## **Findings**

This section presents the primary results extracted from the field work. According to participant reflections, the effect of the intervention is demonstrated in the previously described four dimensions: 1) in the participants' ability to cohabit with others in the school, b) in their increased awareness of the reality of others improving the participants' relationships, 3) in their ability to express their own experiences in a safe and respectful environment, which ultimately 4) improved the participants' academic skills. Next, we present some of the results of the qualitative analysis for the four analysed topics.

### *Improvement in the group's relationships*

As demonstrated in previous studies, some children in care centres experience behavioural problems and difficulties creating long-lasting strong bonds with other children and with residential care workers (Rutter, 2000; Delap, 2013; Pinheiro, 2006). In our research, some analyses of the participants' responses provided transformative insights into how their relationships improved as a result of the dynamics of the DLG. This dynamic was characterized by a respectful and egalitarian dialogue and a rewarding feeling from doing something together, both of which were strongly linked to the creation of a new meaning in the children's lives. In fact, some children reported perceiving themselves as a "family", illustrating a transition away from the feelings of isolation reported in other investigations (Berens & Nelson, 2015). In the following quotes, this feeling is broadly stated by two of the adolescents interviewed:

*It is very cool because we are all of us together; it is not a nonsense book, but you truly realise, you compare what happens to him or to yourself, what you have in*

*common and what is different between the pair of you. It is an afternoon in which we feel as if we are a family, we are together and we can talk (Tania).*

*It is nice to have all of us together within a family atmosphere (Alan).*

DLGs encourage togetherness, and participants enjoyed being involved because the teens shared conversations that were linked to common worries and interests. Thus, DLGs strengthened their feeling of community, which directly influenced the students to feel closer to one another. Alberto, one of the boys involved in the DLG, commented that for him, the DLG was the first time he had openly shared experiences in his time at the centre: “I have never seen before so many people around a table talking about the same topics in the centre; it seems we are now more closely united”.

Tania, another participant, confirmed Alberto’s feeling and emphasised the relevance of being together in the DLG because the discussions helped her and her mates know one another better. This result is particularly relevant because these adolescents shared the same living space but normally did not have opportunities to talk. The DLG was their first opportunity to converse openly:

*It is a session in which we are together. It is not the usual stuff, separated flats; it is a moment that helps us to know each other better; we are all together and we get to know each other a bit better.*

These moments and spaces that centred on dialogue and reflection helped the children acquire useful emotional skills for their daily lives in the school. This evidence strongly refutes several analyses conducted by authors such as Pinheiro (2006) who asserted that children may lose these types of skills whilst in institutional care. For example, Tania said she was losing her shyness and acquiring more self-confidence thanks to DLG: “At first I was embarrassed, but not any more now, as we have more self-confidence now”. Likewise, Marta argued that the comfortable and respectful atmosphere in the DLG enabled the construction of sincere friendships:

*The atmosphere is great. There is a higher degree of friendship between us, therefore lesser risk of being laughed at by the rest of the group. I have nothing to hide here (Marta).*

### *Knowledge of the reality of others and the development of empathy*

Sharing a dialogue space through a book in which thoughts and reflections are connected to the participants' lives encourages greater knowledge of other people. Empathising with the situations that other people normally face increases children's capacity to think about other people's circumstances and improves personal well-being, particularly when participants' situations are quite similar (Flecha, Garcia, & Gomez, 2013; Garcia-Carrion, 2015; Freire, 2007). In the following quote, Abel affirms that reading a book such as *Oliver Twist* helped him understand and talk about things that occurred in their mates' lives, such as a mother's death.

*With this book, you realise what happens to everybody. This book is similar to what occurs to us. (...) For example, in the first chapter, when they talked about the mother who died while giving birth... (...) We can give advice to one another, among us.*

Quilian explained a situation he experienced in the centre that rendered this development of empathy visible. Thanks to reading *Oliver Twist* and being aware of Oliver's difficulties finding food every day, Quilian and her colleague Alberto developed an increased sensitivity to discrimination and inequality. Discussing Oliver's situation rendered it possible to put themselves in someone else's position.

*For instance, one evening while having supper, Alberto got annoyed because we wanted to throw the food away, and he made the point that Oliver would have eaten it. (...) I liked it from the beginning. I had read the book already, but I could not remember so many things. Now I have put myself in their skin.*

Consequently, knowing one another better promoted greater friendship and a desire to be helpful. Reading together encouraged the children to feel like a community, which clearly influenced their well-being and their relationships. In addition, this dynamic also helped to counteract the painful cognitive and emotional consequences that children experience when familiar bonds are broken at an early age (Browne, 2009; Delap, 2010). Alan's words exemplified these benefits; in fact, Alan affirmed that the DLG helped him to understand his peers and be a part of a solidarity-based group.

*It is beneficial; everyone has his own ideas. I like it because you get to know what others think. (...) It is cool. You read for a while. What is really great is that people enjoy what I say and I listen to them. This way we know what everybody else knows; in a way, we are a strong, united group (Alan).*

#### *Freedom to express experiences and feelings in a respectful and safe environment*

As we have mentioned in previous sections, at least 50% of foster children exhibit emotional and behavioural disorders resulting from negative experiences that occurred while living in a centre (Fischer, Dölitzsch, Schmeck, Fegert, & Schmid, 2016; Emerson & Lovitt, 2003). By having children read classic authors, DLGs enabled the creation of a safe and free space in which adolescents could express their life experiences not only with their educators but also with their peers. Participants' reflections demonstrated these effects in many of their narratives; for example, Carlos said that reading and sharing *Oliver Twist's* story gave him the strength to struggle in the face of difficulties: "I liked it because kids are struggling for their lives; in fact, very difficult lives (...) It helped me to accept and learn the facts of life". In the same vein, Tania's involvement in the DLG was the catalyst allowing her to confess her situation when living with their parents. Like Oliver, Tania was quite poor, and she did not have a problem sharing her experiences with their mates during the gathering.

*I think it is good for us. I have identified with the kid, and in the end, he is just like us. In my case, we had nothing at home; we were so poor. I believe it was good for my brother (Tania).*

Marta and Manuel detailed in the interviews how *Oliver Twist's* story was an inspiration to express feelings and experiences that were similar in their own lives. Drawing on previous research, this profundity is quite unusual in children in these conditions; DLGs are open opportunities for children to address their emotional disorders.

*It is fine. In a way it is similar to what we have, but described in an old-fashioned way. We have gone through tough periods (...) it is our time; we have to express what we feel, even if it is through the narrative (Marta).*

*What I liked about the book is that the protagonist kid is an orphan; I am not an orphan myself, but since I do not live with my parents, I have felt a bit like him (Manuel).*

DLGs provide a space in which the reluctance to express certain ideas disappears because the participants no longer worry about what other people might say; their goal is to share and enjoy reading the book. Thus, DLGs create an egalitarian space for dialogue in which everyone is happy and safe (Pulido & Zepa, 2010; García-Carrión, 2015; Flecha, 2015). For example, Alberto, normally quite cautious about talking about his feelings, perceived a radical and dynamic change in the DLG's comfortable atmosphere:

*It is true that the gatherings allow us to express ourselves. I want to say what is good, what is bad; I normally don't express it as I am afraid of how they will look at me. I don't want them to know certain things.*

Similarly, Tania also felt free and comfortable in this reading space, and this sensation enabled her to talk about her life without fearing others' reactions.

*It is a session in which we can say what we feel deep down, what we feel is good, what we feel is bad; you are free to express yourself the way you want, to say what you believe (Tania).*

These positive experiences by all participants in the DLG generated a state of well-being that may consequently promote improved emotional stability. The participants were subsequently better prepared to face the reality of their lives and search for a better future, as demonstrated in Alberto's words where he explained his impetus to follow Oliver's steps to change his life:

*It helps us on a day-to-day basis; it helps me because it makes me realise what he has been through; he never gave in. This makes me think that we do not have to give in as we have everything; however, many times we give in unfortunately; this type of thing gives us further strength (Alberto).*

*Improvement in academic skills*



The academic problems of children and adolescents in residential care centres are quite clear in the results of studies performed in various countries. In all cases, their academic results, levels of education and access to postsecondary education are low compared with the standards that the strategy Europe 2020 established in those fields (Jackson & Cameron, 2015; Zima et al., 2000; Montserrat, Casas, & Baena, 2015). In some cases, studies noted that the primary problem was associated with focusing all of the actions in centres on addressing personal and family problems and therefore neglecting academic skills (Montserrat, Casas, & Baena, 2015). DLGs not only enable the creation of a reflective space and personal transformation but also foster the improvement of academic skills. Many of the DLG participants' comments offered clear examples of this notion. Quilian acquired a passion for reading as a result of the DLG that stimulated a new interest in books.

*The book is interesting. When a chapter ends, I look forward to the next one; each time I feel more involved and desire to read the book. Every day I want to know more about the book (Quilian).*

In the same manner, Manuel and Alan agreed that without their involvement in the DLG, their desire to read and read classic books would not be possible. Both cases illustrate the relevance of connecting children's interests with academic skills such as reading: 'Yes, I would like to continue with another book, but only because of the gathering; otherwise, I would not have the habit of reading (Manuel)'.

*It's good to talk about a book, reading, talk about something that is not rubbish, on the contrary, to talk about something good. Apart from that, we have also fostered reading (Alan).*

Despite this increasing interest in reading because of DLGs, other academic skills improved that are necessary for improving minors' performance in secondary education. Quilian said that he had progressed in oral expression: "I express myself more now". Alan acquired more vocabulary: "You increase your vocabulary", and Laura approached different types of learning, particularly in areas connected with language learning:

*This way, the participants better understand how to read. We learn to express ourselves, to discuss things; besides, it is in the Catalan language (...) I can read and express myself much better now, I read much more than I did before (Laura).*

## **Conclusions**

According to international and Spanish data regarding children who live in foster or institutional care centres, it is extremely difficult for these minors to have a dignified life, particularly as adults (Silvano da Silva, de Lima, Rios, & Rolim, 2016). These difficulties increase their possibilities of falling into disadvantaged situations that are connected with various social areas such as education and health. Indeed, studies indicated that children in institutional care have severe problems finishing compulsory education and gaining access to university (Fangen, Johanson & Hammaren, 2011; Höjer & Johansson, 2010; Montserrat, Casas, & Baena, 2015) and are frequently disenchanted with school. However, our findings demonstrate that the DLG is an intervention that is resolving this situation. DLGs promote reading and sharing classic books, creating new and inspiring meanings in children's lives, meanings connected to an interest in learning and acquiring new skills. In fact, our analysis illustrates that the DLG is contributing to improving several language skills, such as vocabulary acquisition and oral expression. Consequently, interventions and policies to improve the problems of children in institutional care from a social work perspective may include strategies that foster dialogic reading and high expectations (Munte, 2015; Jackson, 2001; Jackson & Cameron, 2015).

Another obstacle detected in the literature review concerns violence and health risks suffered by children and adolescents in institutional or foster care (von Borczyskowski, Vinnerjung, & Hiern, 2013; Vinnerljung, & Hiern, 2011; Traube, James, Zhang, & Landsverk, 2012; Cheng, & Lo, 2010). This situation infringes on minors' human rights and renders shaping successful life trajectories impossible. In our analysis, we observed that educational actions such as the DLG, which have been considered effective evidenced-based interventions (Flecha et al, 2015) in social work, are mitigating the violence and health problems experienced in the centres or problems previously experienced by minors when the children lived with their families. In fact, this article demonstrates a set of benefits connected with children's emotional well-

being. First, the article demonstrates that DLGs contribute to improving relationships among adolescents and workers, relationships that are free of violence. Second, the implementation of DLGs creates safe spaces for children, that is, spaces in which children can share their worries and dreams without negative feedback and with high expectations. This functioning in fact influences adolescents to increase their self-esteem and to make sense of their lives. Based on this evidence and also following Freire's (1997) words, social-educational interventions should be based on dreams, values, science, utopias and ethics to be useful and successful.

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