Protection of unaccompanied child and adolescent migrants in Catalonia.

Inhabited Places, Occupied Places or Non-Places?

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1. Introduction

In Catalonia, the reception centres specifically designed for the so-called MENA (*Menor Extranjero No Acompañado*; Vilà, Freixa, Sánchez, Massot & Ruiz, 2020), or migrant youths classed as unaccompanied minors, are made up of the emergency protection services, the primary reception and integrated attention services, and supervised flats for young people from 16 to 18 (Departament de Treball, Afers Socials i Famílies, 2019). There also exist protection centres within the regular social services, such as the residential intensive education centres (CREI in their Catalan initials) and the residential educational action centres (CRAE), which also cater to these minors (Departament de Drets Socials, 2022). In addition to this, due to the complexity of the migrant youths' situation of vulnerability (Vilà, Freixa, Sánchez & Mateo, 2021), there are other services that may attend to them: these are external facilities that are not part of the government department known as the General Direction of Attention to Children and Adolescents (DGAIA, in its Catalan initials, from here on), but which also intervene among migrant youth; schools for example.

This article aims to investigate the conditions making it possible for migrant youths to live in (or not) the education centres that host them. To this end we adopted the distinction between *occupying* and *living in* a place, and we also drew on the concept of the *non-place*, developed by French theorist Marc Augé (2000), to pose the essentially pedagogical (although also potentially political) question of the educational model that should be offered to youths migrating without family members or other adult guardians. If, as Philippe Meirieu (2018) argues, education consists in providing both a *place* in the world and tools for occupying it, what kind of place does the Catalan reception system offer these young people?

Addressing this question also requires us to distinguish between *space* and *place*, a distinction put forward by anthropologists such as Marc Augé (2000) and Manuel Delgado (2018; 2007). If we embrace their analyses, we may say in summary that a *space* implies a surface with specific limits, while a *place* can be seen as a point that is recognised through identification with it. A space does not correspond to anyone in particular; it is a physical extension through which bodies move without leaving traces or forging ties. In contrast, a place can be seen as involving subjective identification and belonging, in the sense pointed out by Ward (2022) in the case of unaccompanied children, that is, as a sense of belonging that entails a fundamental psychological and emotional well-being for their integration process. Augé and Delgado argue that a space becomes a place when it is *lived in*, i.e., when the space becomes lived experience. Does the Catalan reception and protection system for children and adolescents offer the conditions necessary for young people to *live in* its institutions? And if so, what educational model makes this possible?

It should also be noted that, with certain nuances, we can assimilate the concept of the *non-place* to that of the space. The non-place, according to Augé (2000), is a space of non-life that the subject occupies anonymously and in isolation (even while existing there with others). In contrast to the place, which offers a space in which identify can form and take root, the non-place neither offers somewhere to encounter others nor builds shared references among a

group. Examples of non-places are airports, supermarkets and also refugee camps. Non-places prevent individuals from appropriating them, which is why we see them as being *occupied* rather than really *lived in*. Do there exist any non-places within the reception and protection system?

José García Molina (2017; 2012) has discussed non-places from a pedagogical perspective, characterising them as spaces of homogenization that impede identification or symbolic self-attribution and impose new experiences of institutional abandonment for those occupying them. These, then, are spaces where subjects are not recognised in their singularity but conceptualised through labels – in this case "MENA" – which often identify them as problematic. Is it possible to live in a place based on this situation? Or are these young people instead forced to occupy spaces in which no kind of educational work is possible? What would make reception centres feel like spaces of belonging?

In what follows we attempt to show that the institutions studied can be seen as spaces that are occupied rather than lived in by young migrants; spaces in which integration has little chance of taking place since they do not provide sufficient support for more inclusive initiatives (Goździak, Main, & Suter, 2020).

2. Method

A qualitative study was performed to gather and triangulate the views of three groups: (a) youths who had migrated alone to Barcelona; (b) social educators working in reception centres with them; and (c) the managers of these centres. The sample was intentional and representative of the groups. In Catalonia, social educators are professionals with a university degree specialized in socio-educational work and the accompaniment of people at risk of vulnerability or social exclusion with a similar perspective to FESET (European Social Education) and AIEJI (International Association of Social Educators).

The study was framed following a theory-driven perspective because of the questions and the

data obtained were guided by a systematic review, but also with the aim of contributing to the theoretical generation (Meyer & Ward, 2014). The findings presented here are partial results of a broader study titled "Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue for Fostering a Culture of Peace among Youth and Foreign Unaccompanied Minors in Barcelona and Melilla" (ReligDialog) (RTI2018-095259-B-I00).

Among the migrant youth, seven discussion groups were set up, bringing together a total of 42 participants. Five of these groups were held in DGAIA centres and two among young people from outside this circuit. The DGAIA groups were held in two reception centres, two basic centres of social attention and one supervised flat. Two of the discussion groups featured young people of diverse African origins, both in DGAIA centres, while in the other groups the participants were mainly Moroccan.

Among the centre staff, 15 interviews were performed in Barcelona in the following types of facilities: the emergency protection service; the primary reception and care centres; flats for young people aged from 16 to 18; the CREI (residential intensive education centres) and CRAE (residential educational action centres); and facilities not belonging to the reception and protection system. Lastly, one DGAIA manager and a manager of a third-sector centre working with migrant minors were interviewed. In all instances, we were recognized as researchers and none of us was part of the community. However, we had the support of the DGAIA which facilitated most of the contacts and enabled us to access the centres despite the challenges. The collaboration agreement with the DGAIA and the oversight provided by the bioethics committee of the University of Barcelona were essential in surmounting ethical challenges to get young people to participate while safeguarding their well-being. All participants provided informed written consent after they were informed about the voluntary nature of the study, and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Specifically, in Anonymized (2022) we provide elements of meta-analysis which emerged with the participation of highly vulnerable young people in focus groups: emotions transmitted either individually or collectively and relevant

4

factors that influenced the dialogical practice of interviews and/or focus groups.

Three interview scripts were drawn up, one for each of the three groups mentioned above, and these were then assessed in discussion groups with specialists in the field who validated their structure and measuring instruments. The final scripts comprised 6 major dimensions: (1) the migration process; (2) the youths' needs; (3) the resources available to them; (4) competences and responsibilities; (5) perceptions; and (6) the youths' expectations for the future. However, in this article we centre only on those dimensions made up of the analytical categories shown below (Table 1), organised according to the script and the group.

Table 1. Categories of analysis.

The data analysis was carried out by making literal transcriptions of the discussion groups and interviews and subsequently performing a descriptive and interpretative analysis of the data obtained using Nvivo v.11 PRO software, following the content analysis steps. As showed in the Table 1, codes were made of the participants identification as well as the category code (SE: Social Educators; TS/DAGAIA: Third-sector centre manager or DGAIA manager, respectively; Y: Youths).

3. **Results**

Based on the analysis, the results were organised into two sections that are fed by the mentioned categories. The first focuses on the services devoted to the identification, reception and integration of migrant youths, and was constructed using the interviews with the social educators and managers. The second explores more the places inhabited, the services and the spaces occupied, both physically (whether community facilities or those of the DGAIA or third sector, depending on the young people's documentation) and symbolically. In this second section we drew mainly on the views of the young migrants themselves, as well as on social educators' views.

3.1. Identification, reception and integration

The path of these young people through the reception and protection system begins when they are *identified*. If the young person refuses this procedure, they stay in the streets, which is when the Barcelona City Council Service for Identification and Intervention (SDI, in its Spanish initials) comes into action. Young people agreeing to enter the system stay in the reception and integration services until they reach 18.

3.1.1. Identification: public space, an occupied place.

The SDI is a team of social educators responsible for working with migrant minors living in the streets. They work throughout the city to set up links with the protection system not only for young people who have just arrived but also for those they know that are "refractory" to intervention by the DGAIA.

The public spaces of the streets become places (squares, parks) occupied by these youths, who may also occupy squats.

> *D: If something comes up, it's that there's a bunch of kids who are either taking drugs, they're a bit at risk, they spend the night in a park or some square…*
> *L: Shacks and stuff… If we don't meet them where they are […] we try to create a list for example, of refractory minors, who don't want to go to the reception centres.* (SE9, code1.2; ref.1)

The presence of young people in public spaces often evokes a sense of social undesirability, leading to doubts regarding their safety as they are often perceived as potentially dangerous. In response, the SDI addresses this ambivalence by seeking to both attend to the collective needs and maintain control over public spaces.

Identifying the youths and offering them access to the reception system represents the primary strategy on their arrival, according to the DGAIA:

When they arrive, they get access to the protection system straight away and with some

quality, so they don't spend hours at the police station as happened before. That means

shelter from the very beginning, immediate attention, the first, with safeguards of their

rights and for the quality of care. (DGAIA, codeB.6; ref.1)

The **primary instance service of the local public prosecutor's office** aims to respond to the first needs of migrant minors arriving at the police station in their first 24 hours in the city.

If a kid arrives from under a lorry, the first need is to orient him [...] explaining to him

where he was. Because sometimes they didn't know if they were in Barcelona or the

Basque Country, for example. And from there on coordinate with the DGAIA, the local

public prosecutor and the rest, to find out his age and be able to send him to some kind

of centre. (SE8; code3.6; ref.1)

This service is in the same building as the Barcelona police headquarters. Since 2016, at peak periods of arrivals, the DGAIA has had to deal with a seriously overcrowded reception and protection system. Catalonia – like France, Italy, and Portugal –ensured that all migrant minors, regardless of their legal status, received the same protection as locally-born children (Hjern, Stubbe Østergaard, Norredam, Mock-Muñoz de Luna, & Goldfeld, 2017). The reception system itself authorised the young migrants would sleep on mattresses on the floor under inadequate conditions in public police departments. A non-place, perhaps?

Thus, the arrival in Catalonia of these youths is established in a "physical space" that can be the street or the local public prosecutor's office to which they go by themselves to access the protection system. Both spaces can be identified with the control. Entry into the protection system supposes the assumption of their guardianship by the Administration.

3.1.2. Reception: a non-place

Once they were exposed in the media, these conditions began to change. Through pressure from both the media and the *Síndic de Greuges* (a public office channelling citizens' complaints about

services), the **Emergency Protection Services** and the **Primary Attention Facilities (DAI** in their Spanish initials) were set up, which were quickly overwhelmed, and the young people stayed much longer than the stipulated periods before passing on to a residential centre, with a solidly established project.

> *They rot here. It's an emergency centre that works like a first reception centre. Exactly like that. The average stay is 5.5 months […], they've worked it out, but there are cases of a year and cases of three months.* (SE12, code3.1; ref.1)

After passing through the emergency services or immediate attention facilities, the young migrants move on to the **primary reception and integrated attention** services (**SPAI**, in their Spanish initials). Social educators in these centres explained their duties in terms of their differences from the emergency services.

> *It's called a primary reception centre, but it's not for transit, or for emergencies for those arriving for the first time. We receive kids from the DGAIA, when we've got places available. And we process their documentation for them, and they can eventually leave the centre when they reach 18 with education and papers.* (SE1; code1.1; ref.1)

In the centres where we interviewed staff members, there were normally around 100 young people, although the number varied greatly. The DGAIA has reported the overcrowding of these centres and their unsustainable situation, although it also claims, as one social educator confirmed, that this was improving: "*The summer camps didn't have the minimum conditions for living there, but since 2019 we've been making the change […], but I'm not sure that I really agree, because sometimes these places lack a bit of warmth* (DGAIA; codeB.6; ref.2)". These changes or improvements were also perceived by the management in one of the Catalan services working with migrant children and youths. They affirmed that while the emergency services were emptying, the primary reception and integrated attention services were filling up.

The services described up to now are specifically designed for migrant minors. The DGAIA has identified these youths with a single signifier: MENAs. This neologism, meaning a migrant minor, is one of the foundation stones of an institutional apparatus characterised by being a non-place (García Molina, 2012). One social educator, assessing her centre, recalled this idea: *"I don't think it's a centre that's appropriate for this group, and it makes much of our educational work difficult, not having a proper centre"* (SE12, code1.2, ref.2).

In these services what prevails, is the emergency of the present moment (recalling the name of reception system's first service); and therefore, integration is a highly improbable result for the young inmates, since their processing by the system prevails over their stay in it (García Molina, 2012). The purpose of these reception centres is to find a residential centre for them. Nevertheless, here a paradox arises: the primary reception and integrated attention services have become residential centres (i.e., they are no longer temporary), but are still specifically for the MENA category.

> *The reception centre, supposedly, should be just that, because they're supposed to arrive from the emergency centre; but since we're following what they tell us in the DGAIA and the company, we never know where we're going to end up.* (SE13, code1.1, ref.4)

For this reason, the management of the independent facility interviewed suggested that the reception centres should broaden their scope to include all youth, thereby distancing themselves from any kind of labelling or the stigma attached to particular groups: *"We should try to make everyone welcome in the reception centres, Spanish kids and those from abroad"* (TS, codeD.2; ref.2).

The construction of the reception system in the emergency phase focused on a network of centres aimed solely at unaccompanied minors; in the words of García Molina (2012), non-places. Even though, at first, these centres bring advantages such as maintaining relationships with people from one's own culture and with a migratory experience -factors that can foster

resilience (Mateos & Dobler, 2021) and the feeling of belonging (Ward, 2022)-, presented certain limitations. The emergency Protection Services and Primary Attention Facilities were planned for the reception and retention of youths in view of the exponential increase in arrivals in Spanish territory (Bravo & Santos-González, 2017), where the assistance to the youth migration project begins with the processing of documents and some training that, in general, does not coincide with the interests of young people. These centres, which are prefigured as "non-places", are a priori transit centres, although some youths have remained in them until they came of age.

3.1.3. Integration: a non-place and a place

The DGAIA places the stress on its residential services (which it calls "integration" services), since these take in all types of young people. For this reason, they can by definition be seen more as places than spaces; it could be assumed that they offer the conditions of possibility for both local and migrant youths to inhabit them as places. The reality, however, is that in these centres the migrant population outweighs the Spanish, and thus they still tend towards ghettoization. One social educator from a residential educational action centre (CRAE from here on) evidenced this institutional logic when referring to her young charges:

> *The majority are obviously kids who migrate alone, though sometimes we also have Spanish ones, of Roma origins or from Latin America but born here, or just from other regions of the country. They're all boys, males, it's not a mixed centre.* (SE, code1.1; ref1).

The management of the supervised flats, like the reception centres, attempted to set up open facilities enabling educational work that avoided the stigmatising dynamics of social categories – in our case the MENA label: "*We've been trying for some time to get kids from other countries to live together with kids from here, and I can tell you that the speed of learning is multiplied tenfold*" (TS, codeD.2; ref.1)

As mentioned above, living with people with similar migratory experiences and cultures helps build resilience, as does living with people from the host country's culture (Mateos & Dobler, 2021). However, the reality of the centres, with most non-local children, hinders the acquisition of the skills of the new culture (language and language, cultural codes...). It is in this sense that the importance of these young people frequenting other "spaces" becomes crucial in bolstering their resilience.

3.2. Lived-in places, occupied places, new places

The places inhabited by the young migrants can be seen as mere accommodation or as home. They are places that they occupy because they live there, but where one lives can be experienced as accommodation or something more like home. The external services are also occupied places, some called for by society, since they are responsible for obtaining documentation for the youths. Once they reach 18, however, a new place presents itself: independence.

3.2.1. Inhabited places: accommodation versus home

Here we make a distinction between accommodation, or places designed to be inhabited, and home, which has more emotional connotations, in terms of a place that one lives in and makes one's own. The reception and protection system offers dwellings that do not always provide the necessary conditions to be inhabited in this way.

Most of the centre staff interviewed told us of buildings with problems, especially in the reception centres. These had been changed several times in the search for adequate premises. They could be characterised as provisional buildings. For example, in the emergency services:

> *We're in a hotel that they've given us. It sounds stupid, but everything affects us. The layout of the rooms, the colour of the walls, the lights in the corridors, etc. It's not a house, it's not welcoming. Also, we have to be careful, right? We can't go into some*

areas because it disturbs the clients. The centres should have open areas, a play area, a lawn, a patio or somewhere to be outside and breathe, to relax in. (SE14; code1.2, ref.4)

The SPAI had also had problems with repeated moves. This situation again shows that it is a provisional building.

They had some previous contracts with schools that they couldn't break, and for four months we moved to another camp near the woods. It was terrible, 20 minutes walking along forest tracks, when it rained it turned into a mud bath, we and the kids were always completely fed up and they had no way of going down to the village. It was half an hour's walk, so we turned into taxi drivers, mainly. We could hardly do any educational work. (SE1; code1.1, ref.1)

This provisionality shows, as has already been pointed out, that the hasty creation of the Emergency Protection Services and Primary Care Facilities without a solid socio-educational program to support them, made it difficult for young people to build a feeling of belonging to the centres that hosted them, thus making the integration process difficult.

The **CRAE** staff interviewed also complained of the conditions in the centres, particularly the maintenance of the buildings. These were still only accommodation, not home: "*There are some centres with only one shower; we have two here, but it's not enough. There are no proper spaces for computers, there's a sports track, but we share it… It's not ideal, not at all*" (SE6, code1.2, ref.1).

Meanwhile, the young people interviewed, in general, felt comfortable in these centres in the sense that they had everything they needed to cover their need for shelter: "*You know, we have everything […]. It's like being at home, we sleep in a bedroom, the timetable, the toilets and everything is good*". (Y2, C.1, ref1).

Apart from this, as in any accommodation or building, there were elements missing or that could be improved. Thus, in one of the centres the youths noted that the bunk beds creaked, and

neither were the mattresses in good conditions: "*My back aches because of the bed. Not even my grandad could sleep here.*" (Y1, C.1, ref1). In another centre, there were connection problems: "*Everything's good, apart from the Wi-Fi, which is terrible. (Laughs) I mean, I send a message and it takes five minutes to arrive.*" (Y3, C.1, ref1)

The dormitories were not designed to accommodate so many people; as a result, interviewees told of lack of space and excess heat: "*Bedroom, it's hot. There's no space. Four kids in a bedroom, can't sleep*" (Y1, C.1, ref3). However, they valued the fact that their basic needs were met: "*here you can sleep, you've got a bed, food, clothes, that stuff. But if you're living rough in the streets, I won't have nothing*" (Y1, B.6, ref1).

Seeing the centre as home, however, was difficult. They only referred to this feeling of being at home when they had been able to build good relationships with their peers, as a resilience factor (Mateos & Dobler, 2021). Others, in contrast, saw it as a prison: "*We're in the mountains like a prison, I'm telling you (laughs). You go to bed at nine. They close your bedroom like a prison…*" (Y3, C3.1, ref1). They knew that, in the supervised flats, they had more freedom and that probably it would be easier for them to achieve their migration objectives.

> *I want to live here, in a flat, relaxed. When you're 18, you have a flat, you get training and things go well and everything, you know? […] with your bedroom, you come in when you want, you go out when you want, nobody's watching over you, you do your shopping, and you learn a lot more things than in a centre.* (Y4, C.3.2, ref2)

Regardless of the type of centre, the youths saw their stay as a transition towards the life that they yearned for and which was the motive behind their migration process. This transition, however, was much more drawn out that they had previously imagined, thereby giving rise to feelings of anger which were difficult to manage:

> *Sometimes I feel better, sometimes I feel bad. Because imagine a guy who's been here for two to three years, who doesn't have papers, so how am I supposed to feel? […] we*

came here for a reason, to help family and everything. […] Sometimes it's really difficult to understand, it's really difficult to understand. (Y2, C.4, ref2)

They were aware of the role the centres played in in their life project, although they may not feel at home or had difficulties adapting to them: "*We're not in good moment, but things will get better, but if your look out for yourself. If you end up in the streets, they're not going to get better for you*" (Y1, C.2, ref2).

The voices of these young people support the thesis that a supportive living arrangement (e.g. small living group like supervised flat and placements promoting freedom with few restrictions) stands as an ideal resource for the integration of these young people in front of the reception centres subject to control dynamics fiercest (Mateos & Dobler, 2021).

3.2.2. Occupied places

The reception services have links with local community facilities where recently arriving minors can continue their education, as any Spanish young person would do, since education is compulsory up to the age of 16.

For the DGAIA, education is a priority. The education and training centres necessarily have official status (stemming from the period when minors began to arrive and were not accepted without documentation) and are now state accredited. However, in one of the centres where we interviewed staff, they complained of the bureaucracy necessary for obtaining aid, which meant that they had less time to spend with the young people in the facility.

> *More and more, because of problems with subsidies and benefits, they're turning us into technocrats with more bureaucratic work and less time for attention to the youths. We have conditions that are pressurising us so much that there's a very high risk that the quality of the service will be lost.* (SE3, code1.2, ref.1)

Nevertheless, staff also noted that the external services they worked in could be a more stable model in the youths' lives than other centres where moves were frequent, because they could build more solid and lasting ties with the social educators: "*As they're kids who change so much, where they put down roots and have ties is with us, because they'll be here more time, every day. It's their place of reference*" (SE3, code1.1, ref.1).

The connection of these young people with external centres, most of them educational, are an anchor point to introduce themselves into the new culture of the country of origin, since they share the space with non-migrant colleagues. In addition, in these spaces they can find other references and models, in addition to the professionals from the assigned centre (CRAE, supervised flat). Linking with them can foster a feeling of belonging in the centres in the sense pointed out by Ward (2022) and facilitate the occupation of a "place".

Societal demands to offer help for substance using youth or to remove them from public spaces can result in a governmental solution of placing youth in another kind of space. This issue is not often made visible since it shows the failure of the protection circuits. The harshness of the migratory experience, and the consequent mourning, pushes some young people to consume.

We carried out an interview with workers in a service for mitigating damage caused particularly by injecting cocaine and heroin. Their relationship with migrant youths began with an assignment stemming from the social panic that arose in Barcelona due to media coverage of the issue. A social educator was highly critical of the assignment since his centre could not respond to the problems of drug addiction among adolescents and youths through a service designed for a different type of stigmatised social category: the drug addict.

> *Putting kids together with criminals, really longstanding junkies… Little Mohamed, arriving from Tangiers, what he wants is to study, to work, to go to a club and dance, what we all want at that age. He doesn't want to be surrounded by people who has*

thrown away 350 or more opportunities and whose life revolves around drugs. At the moment I don't think there's any type of facility that works. (SE5, code1.2, ref.5)

What this social educator called for, as did the management team of another facility, was the creation of specific centres for young migrants involved with drugs. Whatever the case, the institutional identification of this group would be based on two signifiers: migrant and drug-taker. It would therefore appear logical to create a specially designed service for the group, despite this double identification, since the single category of drug dependency is so diverse that it may not be the most beneficial for migrant youth.

3.2.3. Documentation: a called-for place, a designated place

Before the application of the new Foreigners Law, the process of obtaining documentation started with young migrants acceding to services via the public prosecutor's office (the police) or the emergency protection services. The first step was identifying them from the data in their passports. Secondly, radiography tests are carried out to determine the youths' age, although not all are subjected to these. They are performed particularly when it is suspected that the young person is 18 or over. In Catalonia, as in Spain, there has been a very important debate about the reliability of these tests and some professionals continue to believe that youths of legal age pose as minors to enter the protection circuit (Cemlyn & Nye, 2012). In case of doubt, the minor status of the young person usually prevails.

There are kids who are over 18, and they want to get into the reception system. So, what do they bet on? That they're not going to get caught out, so they're not going to give us any kind of document, the family aren't going to do it, they're hoping that they can get into the reception system. So, if we do the age tests and they're in luck, so to speak, and they get declared minors, then they get into the system although they're over 18. And that's no trivial matter. (SE12, code3.6, ref.4)

The primary reception and the emergency protection services have staff whose responsibility is to process documentation. In general, this is done by social workers, occasionally aided by a translator. Nevertheless, the complexity of the process means that in some centres a range of different specialists and services become involved, and these slow it down and complicate it further.

The consulates normally take three months to send the documentation needed for the young people to regularise their residence in Spain. If they do not obtain their papers during this period, the Barcelona Social Services Consortium intervenes and initiates a network-based programme to help the young migrant. If the youths' documentation is in order, the process is shorter and, as this educator puts it: "*If they're lucky and they manage to get their passport quickly (or they come with it), then, as a minor, we start to process the application for a NIE* [foreign resident identification number]. *Once this process starts, they're saved*" (SE3, code3.6, ref.6).

Without official residency they have no *place* in our society. In this study we found youths with residency or work permits and others that had been without documentation sometimes for as long as three years. This hurdle has been widely studied in research (Hillmann & Dufner, 2017); and these words from one of the youths bear witness to the difficulty: "*I was here 16, till now, 18, 19, and I don't have a NIE, now they say that you need a work contract. […] It's really, really difficult to find a job here*" (Y1, C3.1., ref1).

The youths were aware of the contradictions and difficulties of getting a job to regularise their situation, which becomes more serious when they reach 18.

> *You've got papers for a year, if the year ends and you don't have work and you don't leave, they take the papers away and you must wait all over again, like when you got here, like it was the first day you came, you know. It's problem of Spain.* (Y2, C3.1., ref1)

Not having documentation has consequences on the youths' education. For example, it not only prevents them from obtaining qualifications, but also hinders the creation of ties with the social

educators due to the frustration and anxiety caused by their situation of administrative uncertainty.

> *The kids want clear answers, and it's their right. This causes problems for us, there's a certain amount of pressure, irritation inside the centre. And also, hindrances, regarding their setting themselves up independently. Because we can't arrange it – not only are we not allowed to, there's no time either to organise their coming of age, to get a flat for them. You just write a report and send them on.* (SE6, code3.6, ref.5).

The slow pace of the bureaucracy becomes especially difficult when the youths reach 18, since the centre where they live can no longer be their home. At this point their path through the reception and protection system ends. This situation produced several important ethical issue amongst the social educators. The following citation encapsulates their feelings:

> *There are also structural obstacles. A lot of kids reach 18, but we can't organise their future, their independent life, we can't guarantee them a residential facility after they're 18, we can't offer them a work position. Ethically we have no answers, sometimes I don't know if we're doing our job properly […]. That's when the person's independence isn't achieved.* (SE6, code3.6, ref.1).

On occasion the young person's stay in the centre can be extended, but this is merely a temporary measure, a stopgap that does not resolve the problem. They can also choose to apply for the state benefits available to youths from 18 to 21.

Until the entry into force of the reform of the Foreigners Law, administrative regularization has been an endless process. Firstly, to prove that you are a minor and, secondly, to regularize the documentation. However, despite all, the condition of minors prevails over that of immigrants (Bravo & Santos-González, 2017). This slowness, which has sometimes lasted for years, allows us to conceptualize this process as "a called-for place". With the reform of the law, which reduces the deadlines for obtaining the documentation, it now becomes a designated place.

Thus, with the reform of the Foreigners Law it appears that the place that our society is offering these young people is at last being reassessed, although there is still much further to go. One aspect that needs to be improved is the information provided by professionals to young people about the procedures to obtain the documentation, given the worries and concerns that this process arouses.

3.2.4. Independence: a new space to occupy

A current concern, emerging some time ago among the government, the DGAIA and professionals in the sector, has to do with the youths' situation once they reach 18. The DGAIA has created flats for youths leaving the system, but this should not be the only alternative.

In this area, both centre staff and the management of the independent centre stated that they followed their charges informally once they had left the facility at 18. In the words of a centre manager: "*I like to think that all the centres do it, in an informal way, they keep attending to the kids, helping them, in terms of information, going to help them with some paperwork, whatever*". (TS; codeB.5, ref.2)

These actions lie beyond the duties of the centre staff. Some such informal actions are essential, such as medical attention, obtaining economic and/or educational resources, or more pressing emergency actions. One social educator noted the following situation:

> *Now, the kids still contact me […], because most of us have Facebook, phones, etc., so it's like "Hey, they've taken my payment away and I don't know what," "OK then, I'll go with you." At school, they say "Don't worry because I've got an educator," there's a classmate, Lucía, and they hand me a kid and away you go.* (SE2, cod1.1, ref1).

Both the social educators and the managers emphasized that the educational connections endured even after the institutional service ended. This aspect underscores how these bonds have fostered a sense of belonging and the cultivation of a shared experience:

This is administrative, right? We terminate your stay; we sign you off and that's it. But, shit, you, when you leave your parents' place, it doesn't mean that you never go back... But, well, the emergencies and the lack of places and funds and all the rest, well, they cause these situations. (TS, codeD.2; ref.3)

The management of the independent centre went further and argued that the social educators' goodwill should no longer be exploited. They informed us that in the FEPA (Federation of Bodies with Subsidised Projects and Flats), a new professional profile was being mooted: that of the specialist in aid for independence.

When you live with someone, a link is forged, positive, negative or neutral, but you create a link, right? It would be good if, apart from the goodwill of the centres, there was a right to some kind of follow-up, without age limits […]. Their passage through the protection system should ensure these kids' insertion in society. In the FEPA we're talking about an independence specialist […] a figure that we still have to define, but who does this follow-up when the kid has need of it. (TS, codeD.2, ref.2)

4. Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this research refer both to the difficulty of access to highly vulnerable youth, as well as to young people who migrate alone. On the one hand, the young people supervised by the DGAIA were interviewed on some occasions with the presence of some educators, an aspect that perhaps did not allow communication to flow freely. In addition, young people who are outside the DGAIA protection system in Barcelona are even more difficult to reach. Those who participated were selected for having a situation of greater emotional and psychological stability, leaving out a reality that in Catalonia is still difficult to access and analyse.

5. Conclusions

These findings support and expand upon existing theories in ways that have implications for practice and policy. There are three main conclusions, related to two main themes of the results.

The first focuses on services for the identification, reception, and integration of young migrants; and the second delves deeper into the inhabited places, the services and the spaces occupied, both physically and symbolically. The social and political context of asylum seekers arriving in Catalonia and neighbouring countries began to change in 2015, due to the so-called "refugee crisis" (Sanfelici, Wellman, & Mordeglia, 2020; Wernesjö, 2019).

Overcrowding in the centres is still a reason for complaint, particularly among emergency services staff, who offer primary attention providing accommodation, upkeep, health care, information, psychological attention and legal support (Vilà et al., 2020). Their work is to make a preliminary analysis of the youths' migration project, to assess their situation and to place them in other reception services or with the family if present in Spain. The stay of these young people in these facilities, however, is being lengthened considerably, as has also occurred in other countries, such as Italy (Sanfelici, Wellman, & Mordeglia, 2020), such that they have become primary reception centres in which a work dynamic arises that seeks to homogenize the outcomes of reception and guardianship (Gimeno, 2017).

The conclusions revolve around the exploration of the physical "spaces" that the young people themselves navigate, which, as we highlighted in the theoretical framework, distinctly differentiate the educational potentials of a "space" versus a "place" as described by anthropologists Augé (2000) and Delgado (2018). A "place" fosters a sense of belonging, while a "space" lacks a sense of rootedness or identification. Thus, the first conclusion is that these hastily established centres, such as hotels, summer camps and hostels, have been experienced by young people as mere spaces rather than meaningful places. The media publicised the youths' situation widely, since in addition to this, at one time they were also sleeping in police stations, paradigmatic examples of non-places (Augé, 2000). In this regard, Menjívar and Perreira (2017) analysed the migration history of minors in the USA and the south of Europe, finding many similarities, and revealing that the reception centres were neither designed to meet the young migrants' needs nor did they ensure their safety.

A second conclusion highlights how the geographical placement of the centres contributed to reinforcing the notion of non-places, impeding the possibility for young people to truly occupy them rather than merely inhabit them. All the staff interviewed in the special services remarked on the importance of the facility being located in an urban centre or having good transport links with one, in contrast with current models based on isolated centres exclusively for migrant minors, which hinder the development of links between the youths and civil society and their inclusion in the social fabric, and have become the object of episodes of intense hostility and racism (da Silva, Fernández, & Meneses, 2020). These aspects result in challenges for unaccompanied minors to cultivate a sense of subjective belonging. As Ward (2022) has pointed out, this hampers their psychological and emotional well-being, which is crucial for their progress in integration processes. Consequently, we conclude that setting up quality attention and residential services may require a local investment of time, money, and human resources, but such services are also necessary as they constitute both opportunities and risks. Location closer to urban centres would be more conducive to the development of a relationship with the larger society, and ongoing lifelong integration as Delgado (2018) would have pointed out.

Attending to the words of the unaccompanied youths accommodated in the centres enabled us to understand their experience. It also enabled us to gather clues to the improvements needed in the facilities. The last conclusion of this study is that these spaces are never neutral because they have an impact on young people's feelings of belonging and their psycho-social wellbeing, producing either security or insecurity (Martínez Rivera, 2020; Ward, 2022). That is why for some all centres were the same, and why for others the conditions of hostility under which they lived spurred them to run away or to express strongly negative feelings. These findings align with García Molina's (2017; 2012) pedagogical perspective on non-places, which portrays them as spaces that homogenize experiences and, by labelling young people as problematic subjects, impose new forms of institutional abandonment. The youths' testimonies conveyed an experience of "occupying" a space, but not of "living in" it, probably due to their limited

opportunities to make decisions affecting their immediate surroundings. For a few, the centre was like "their home," but for the majority it was seen as a place they were "passing through" on the way towards their life objective, a new transition.

The discussion we have followed up to this point, then, allows us to theorise the places in the institutions and the institutions as places. Several pedagogical experiences (Bossé & Solé, 2017; Fryd, 2012; Sánchez-Valverde & Montaner, 2020) have shown that acknowledging subjective singularities enables us to offer children and adolescents an educational place on the basis of which we can work towards the construction of relationships that boost their social and cultural integration (ASEDES, 2007). In contrast, institutional homogenisation because of stigmatised social categories, in this case "MENA," can give rise to rejection of socio-educational intervention. Are these young people recognised in their singularity by the reception and protection system? Does the state regard them as subjects with full rights? Do the centres provide the necessary conditions to be meaningfully lived in? Our study shows that the answers to these questions are controversial. On occasion, it appears that the system is more oriented towards the containment and control of these young people than their integration into society. Nevertheless, it has been shown that the possibility of offering them a habitable *place* depends on the pedagogical commitment of educators and managers to offering them the chance to build emotional ties with the centre, so that it may become a proper place in the world (Mierieu, 2018) despite the bureaucratic and structural hurdles.

6. Research Ethics

Ethical approval for this project was given by the bioethics commission of the University of Barcelona [IRB00003099].

7. Funding details

8. Conflict of interest

The authors confirm that they have no conflict of interest in respect of the material submitted in this article.

9. Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed to developing, testing and conducting the interviews on the framework of the study led by RV. RV, MF and MV coded the texts, while AS reviewed coding with CAQDAS for major themes. MF and AS conducted the in-depth analysis of coded materials and wrote the manuscript with input and final review by RV & MV.

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