Factores de éxito y continuidad educativa entre jóvenes de ascendencia marroquí en Cataluña (España)

Factors afecting educational success and continuity among Young people of Moroccan descent in Catalonia (Spain)

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RESUMEN.
Las investigaciones internacionales muestran la relación que existe entre los resultados que los jóvenes inmigrantes obtienen en la escuela y su integración social, y al abordar su situación escolar señalan que en la mayor parte de países alcanzan peores resultados académicos que sus iguales nativos. Esto es así, en especial entre aquellos grupos que tienen una historia de contacto crítica con las sociedades receptoras, como sucede en el caso de los jóvenes de origen marroquí en Cataluña. En esta CCAA este alumnado obtiene unos bajos niveles de acreditación al finalizar la etapa de escolarización obligatoria, tiene mayores tasas de abandono, y su continuidad en la educación post-obligatoria es menor que la de sus iguales autóctonos. Esta tendencia, sin embargo, invisibiliza las trayectorias de éxito escolar y la participación social de una parte de estos jóvenes de origen marroquí en la sociedad catalana.
Este artículo presenta los resultados de un proyecto de investigación que ha reconstruido las trayectorias biográficas de estos jóvenes y considerando el aporte de agentes implicados en sus procesos de escolarización, transiciones al mercado laboral e integración social, ha analizado los factores que permiten el desarrollo de sus trayectorias de éxito.
Prestamos atención a los resultados que han emergido en la investigación con más relevancia en la construcción de las trayectorias de éxito: el apoyo recibido desde la familia, el capital social que emana del grupo de iguales, la existencia de una experiencia escolar positiva y el impulso desde el asociacionismo intraétnico.

PALABRAS CLAVE.
Éxito académico, marroquíes, escuela, familia, comunidad.

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REVISTA INTERNACIONAL DE INVESTIGACIÓN E INNOVACIÓN EDUCATIVA

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ABSTRACT.

International reports and research emphasize the relation between the results of young immigrants in school and social integration and, in observing their school situation, indicate that in most countries they are worse than their native counterparts. This is particularly true for those groups that have a history of critical contact with host societies as in the case of young people of Moroccan origin in Catalonia. In this Autonomous Community, Morroccan students have low levels of accreditation at the end of compulsory schooling, have higher dropout rates, and their continuity in post-compulsory education is also lower than their native counterparts. This tendency, however, makes invisible the trajectories of school success and the growing social participation of a considerable part of these young people of Moroccan origin of both sexes in Catalan society.

This article presents the results of a research project that, based on the reconstruction of the biographical and academic trajectories of these young people of Moroccan origin and the contribution of agents involved in their schooling, transitions to the labor market and social integration, has analyzed the central factors that allow the development of their success trajectories and the consolidation of long-term academic aspirations.

We pay attention to the results obtained regarding the four trends that have emerged in the most relevant research in the construction of the success trajectories: the support received from the family, the social capital emanating from the peer group, the positive school experience and the impetus received from intra-ethnic associationism

KEY WORDS.

Academic success, Moroccans, school, family, community.

Introduction.

Numerous studies have looked at factors external to the school, such as the socioeconomic and cultural capital of families, to explain the worse results obtained by students from minority backgrounds in various educational systems. However, reports on the education of immigrant children – such as *Helping immigrant students to succeed at school – and beyond (OCDE, 2015), Closing the Gap for Immigrant Students: Policies, Practice and Performance (OCDE, 2010)* – and international studies such as the LISA report (Suarez Orozco, Suarez Orozco & Todorova, 2008) or *The Children of Immigrants at School, a comparative look at integration in the United States and Western Europe* (2013) have found that these young people have more restricted access to quality education. These reports also conclude that some of the factors limiting how students from minority backgrounds experience school are in fact found in the very structure of the education system and in schools themselves (among other factors, inter- and intra-school segregation and discrimination in the classroom).

These two dimensions join together and are amplified with the revelation that results do not improve for most groups even over longer periods of time (Duong, Badaly, Liu, Schwartz, & McCarty, 2016) and considering that academic behaviours and results are particularly concerning for those that have a more critical contact with the host societies (Ogbu, 1991), as is the case with Moroccan students in Catalonia (Gibson, Carrasco, Pàmies, Ponferrada

& Rios, 2013). In Catalonia, it is perceived that students of Moroccan descent have low levels of accreditation at the end of compulsory schooling, higher dropout rates than other groups, and lower rates of continuity in post-compulsory education (Serra & Palaudàrias, 2007; Gibson et al. 2013; Bertran, Ponferrada & Pàmies, 2016). And this despite a longer period of settlement in the community than groups from other nationalities.

These trends make the visibility of successful school pathways and educational continuity among a large proportion of young Moroccans of both sexes in Catalan society all but invisible. By contrast, this article presents the results of research that demonstrates such success from a project[i] that analysed the conditions and opportunities for academic success and educational continuity among young people of Moroccan descent. It also reconstructs the central factors that allow these young people to follow successful educational pathways and establish long-term academic aspirations.

1. School conditions for moroccan students: some considerations.

The well-known proposal by Ogbu (1991) and its later revisions (among others, Carter, 200; Flores-González, 2005; Foley, 2005; Gibson, 2005) allow the repertoire of school behaviours displayed by young people from minority backgrounds to be interpreted by taking into account the principles of social stratification and the positions occupied by families and young people, including the ways in which they interpret reality, develop their relationships and build expectations.

Studies such as those conducted by Suarez Orozco, Suarez Orozco & Todorova (2008) have highlighted the school and family conditions that make it easier for children of immigrant families to follow successful pathways, these being associated with the mother's educational level, the father's work status and the family structure. However, young immigrants with successful pathways in the cited research were not only supported by their families but also by their schools, which were less segregated, had more resources and a better school climate, and were more likely to provide access to positive role models in terms of language, in this case English. This allowed them to successfully navigate the educational system and deal with any difficulties arising in the new contexts. For the Spanish case, a study by Abajo & Carrasco (2004) also showed how among roma students in Spain the socioeconomic dimension, family involvement and associations aimed at promoting school succes were central to successful pathways, but that these cannot be achieved without a positive school experience, which entails establishing educational and affective-relational conditions that strongly support the pathways of these young people.

These conditions can be seen to be of particular significance when we attempt to explain the educational experience of some groups of young people, those who have had a history of critical contact with the host societies and for whom certain symbols and practices of the ethnogroup are constructed in a problematic way, as is the case with young people of Moroccan descent in Catalonia. Several studies (Carrasco, Pàmies & Ponferrada, 2011; Pàmies, 2011; Gibson et al. 2013) have verified the impact on educational pathways of being exposed to negative representations of diversity in school (Leiva, 2015) and how being Moroccan – and Muslim – appears to be incompatible with academic success and social integration. This is a consideration based on an ethnic-cultural recognition that causes problems in society as a whole, with certain practices questioned as being threatening, as

evidenced by the pioneering studies conducted by Zolberg & Litt (1999) and Alba (2005), along with some more recent research (Torrekens & Jacobs, 2015; Van Praag, Agirdag, Stevens & Van Houtte, 2016).

However, as we have seen, a proportion of young people of Moroccan origin of both sexes do follow successful pathways, continue in education and increasingly participate in various aspects of Catalan society. After presenting the methodology used in this study, the following section details the results obtained from a research project aimed at acknowledging this situation and analysing those conditions that lead to the academic success and educational continuity of these young adults in Catalonia. Specifically, we focus on presenting the more relevant dimensions that have emerged: support received from the family, social capital from the peer group, the positive school experience and the figure of the teacher, and the support ofered by the associations.

2. Methodology.

A qualitative methodology was followed, using a convenience sample comprising young people of both sexes. The biographical narratives[1] of 12 young adults (6 male and 6 female) aged 16 to 35 were collected, allowing us to identify factors that have favoured their successful educational pathways and continuity and revealing the complexity of situations faced and strategies implemented by these young people. We also conducted interviews (6) and focus groups with young people, both male and female, of Moroccan descent (4), members of Moroccan associations (1), religious representatives (1), teachers (1) and local authority immigration managers (1), the latter being responsible for overseeing the dynamics of the reception and integration processes of people of Moroccan origin in Catalonia.

3. The school experience for young moroccans.

3.1. *Family support: respect, debt and prestige.*

For young people, family support appears as one of the main factors that promote success at school and educational continuity. This support is materialized in a message aimed at viewing school as an opportunity, in line with what Ogbu considered characteristic of willing minorities, and trusting in school as a means of social mobility. It is a support that the family offers regardless of gender:

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[1] Two sessions with each young individual were carried out. In the first interview they were inquired about their academic and vital trajectory. During the second meeting questions about 7 different dimensions -family of origin, migratory itinerary, ecological environment (destiny and origin), childhood, enculturation and schooling, adolescence and youth (training and path towards emancipation and adult life- were approached.

> "[your parents] have made sacrifices coming here and leaving their family and things and working, doing what they can so that you have a future, a way out; you have a debt to them because they have done it for you, you have to show them that you see that and you are grateful and you give it back somehow" [Group 1 young people, male]

The message encouraging success and continuity in education is articulated from the family group and the social space, due to the intra-ethnic capital it possesses and the position of prestige it can bring within the group. Success becomes not only a source of family pride, but also linked to accumulating respect. A consideration that can go beyond the family nucleus and extend to the whole community:

> "My father, for example, tells me that people, or relatives, are waiting to see what I do... for example, nobody has studied in our family, the only one who has studied is me and people are hoping that I finish my education and that things go well and that" [Group 2 young people, male]

In this situation, young people are exposed to continual comparisons with existing family and community models of academic success. And these assume the form of a life project and expectations, emphasizing, as pointed out by Van Zanten (2001), that the prestige of immigrant families is at stake in school.

However, some young male consider those comparisons not helpful and that they drive them scarcely to success. They have been exposed to them and when showing disagreement they also indicate the limits of family support, in relation with the parents' academical level and with what they consider a more effective way of support.

Regarding young female they identify one of the parents as key for success and rarely consider one of them as limiter of their academical trajectories. In these cases, the key parent who supported the schooling is presented as someone with the capacity to downsize assumptions when the school or academical requirements had demanded behaviours or actions that could lead into confrontation with certain moral norms of the intragroup.

Young female also recognize few familiar practices that explicitly help with school tasks (as pointed by Crull & Domernick, 2003), although they mention some situations when they gained skills and that were useful at school. Therefore, boys and girls signify that their fathers and mothers did not help them with homework, and that they could not have done it due to their lack of knowledge of the language, the contents and also to the little time they have available (as a consequence of their intense time investment on the productive aspect). Young people also hesitate parents would have done it even if they could because, both –boys and girls-, consider school as their own responsibility. Hence a discourse linked with individual interests emerges, which concurs with the effort they saw in their parents and especially, in their mothers.

Following, young female describe how some domestic cultural practices turned them into "biliterates" (following Kenner, 2004), allowing them to know two writing systems, to strengthen inter-generational relations within the family and they perceived positive effects in the achievement of further school abilities, such as memorizing or reading (Kenner, 2004).

Their parents offered scenarios that contributed to develop competences throughout other agents, for example, by letting them attend extracurricular activities (ballet or sports) or paying support teachers when needed, despite of the economical effort.

Nevertheless, all young female mention the existence of a key autochthonous family who supported their family and themselves during childhood and with whom they had established a special bond. That is to say, the own family not only had allowed but also had fostered the relation with autochthonous people, and vice versa, the autochthonous performed some functions that the own parents could not develop. Therefore, young female consider that social recognition does not fade in the absence of successful familiar models.

3.2. School and teachers: institutional support.

As previous research has also found (Abajo and Carrasco, 2004), a notable proportion of the interviewees considered teachers to be an important factor for success and a positive influence in the school experience. The family's views in this regard are expressed in messages received by young people in daily life:

> "Things my father told me, well my mother especially, the psychological side, she said treat your teachers well, they are like your second parents... there is a verse that says that teachers could have been prophets, and they are an example to us" [Group 2 young people, male]

In a similar way, the support – expressed in high expectations – that some of these young people explicitly received from a teacher and the cordial and demanding treatment in their daily relationship made this a key factor in the construction of their academic pathways. However, far from being a view they have of all teachers, or the school itself, these young people consider this support to have been provided by a single teacher and more so after the compulsory education stage (after the age of 16).

Contrary to the above, although expressed by only a few, some of the young people experienced low expectations from their teachers, who made "things more difficult" for them. This is Ahmed's case, who explains that during the 3rd year of Secondary Compulsory School he failed 9 subjects in the same evaluation period. He quited studying because his teacher would always punish him and "downgraded the marks I achieved in the exams". He dropped out school also because, according to him, he joined other boys who did not study either. He met them in a school room, when he was punished and so were the others.

During those critical moments that some boys went through, a change on their schooling conditions played a crucial role. The story of Ahmed is particularly meaningful in this regard. His mother, who initially opposed to enroll his son in a local "secondary school for Moroccans", she decided -after realizing her son's failure track-, to change him to another educational center. Ahmed passed in the new secondary school and was able to continue with the post-compulsory secondary education. He passed the public national examination and now he is about to begin his studies at the university.

The change of schooling conditions in Ahmed's case occurred concurrently with two processes: the support from teachers in the new school and the accumulation of positive social capital from the new intra-ethnic peer group. Not only that, but also it meant the end of being exposed to discrimination and beginning to be able to build himself as a successful student.

In regard to girls, they also suffered discrimination and notice how the expectations on them changed. Zohar explained after she began to use the *hyjab* and make her Muslim identity visible. This situation highlights how the use of certain emblems linked to Islam is considered as a barrier to integration at school, its use being associated with a lowering of expectations. Nevertheless, Zohar managed to finish upper secondary education and continue her studies in the Law Faculty at university:

> "At 17 I wore a headscarf because I decided I was Muslim. That I would be Catalan and Muslim. And I put on the headscarf and discovered I was normal, suddenly I was Moroccan and suddenly I am a non-integrated person and I'm certain not to finish my education and I'll marry at 18 at the latest, right? [...] They gave me up as a lost cause. You've been here your whole life but we see that you haven't integrated, and you wear the headscarf, the teachers gave me no chance. And my parents said fine, study, fine, study for your future, yes, yes, yes, and you'd say the support came from my parents. Because the school gave me up as a lost cause. I got a place at university, I was the exotic element in the Law Faculty for a while" (Zohar)

3.3.   The peer group: towards success or failure.

The experience these young Moroccans had with their peers was conditioned by the opportunities for relationships in the school and social environments they frequented. Some of them moved between interethnic peer groups, especially those who had an educational experience in environments where there was a lesser – or no – presence of other young Moroccans. In these contexts, most of them, and especially the girls, think that from adolescence onwards the situation they lived in resembled a borderland, where they perceived they could not share part of their experiences. Moreover, they say that on occasions they suffered situations of discrimination in these groups, again this being more applicable to females than males.

For most of these young people, their peer group was essentially intra-ethnic. A small number think this became a limited, or limiting, resource in the experience they had at school. Such was Ibrahim experience since he navigated through his school life together with his Moroccan peers of academical failure.

Ibrahim was the only one among Moroccan young people in his peer group who achieved to create a successful trajectory, after repeating 4th grade of Compulsory Secondary School. In his case, one could think that three factors came together: the family support towards the academic continuity, the existence of an academic successful relative as a reference and the support from the school. And yet it exists a fourth factor with great importance: Ibrahim achieved to build a successful trajectory when he took a stand before his peers as someone who respects the religious practices which are privileged in the community. Ibrahim pointed that since then, it was easier for him to navigate among peers, to cope with school

requirements, with the family and with the community. This fact allowed him to be respected and to freeing himself of the pressure under which he had been subjected.

Furthermore, it allowed them to create a pro-school ethos, noting that positive relationships at school are highly productive, intra-ethnic relationships of course included. These relationships, as well as promoting the acceptance of group norms (Eckert, 1989), provided support for attaining goals at school and offered them social capital in the form of confidence and emotional support.

3.4. The association: additive acculturation and social capital.

Most of the young people who were able to describe successful academic pathways and educational continuity attended intra-ethnic associations run by some of the families in their environments. These associations were a informal educational space where the young people's re-socialization and acted as a form of prevention to counteract families reservations' against what they considered social dangers. But above and beyond a parental control strategy and serving as a preventive measure to immunize them from the environments considered less appropriate in their new context, for these young people combining family requirements and pressures and contact with peers in an informal space amounted to a piece of "luck" that drove them toward success:

> "In my association they pushed you to study. They told you: hey, you have to pass upper secondary, you have to do this and that, then there's something else…" (Group 1 young people, male)
>
> "We were lucky that we were boys and we found the association and our parents made us study" [Group 2 young people, male]

These associations implemented strategies for adaptation, academic success and socio-cultural insertion, favouring *additive acculturation* (Gibson, 1988) and making these young people *cultural straddlers* (Carter, 2005). The strategies were reinforced through the valuing and practicing of the community's cultural patterns, where learning Arabic was a badge of honour, not only due to its significance to the family but also, and especially, to religion. In this respect, these young people defined themselves as Muslims and considered that, as a model of behaviour, Islam had helped them to build their successful pathways and continue in education.

4. Discussion and conclusions.

The results of this study provide evidence regarding the main factors young Moroccans identify as having favoured their successful school pathways educational continuity. We are able to identify how a greater acculturation does not involve greater possibility to build successful trajectories. Young Moroccans were able to develop a process of *aditive acculturation* (Gibson, 1988) mainly through the support from the family nucleus, driven by either the father or mother, and not exclusively one of these figures. These young people see themselves as indebted and responsible for the continuity of the family's migration life project and have internalized the discourses of trust they have received towards educational institutions, which has proved instrumental. In the case of females, all of them, but especially

the ones who arrived in Catalonia to enter secondary school, they have internalized these expectations as if they were a neutral subject without gender within the family (Colectivo Ioé, 2003; Veredas, 2008), or even more, as if they were a masculine subject within the family. However, the familiar gender expectations, as women, affect in a variety of ways the initial school expectations, together with factors derived from migration as the common obstacles when entering a new educational system with a different language.

Although support is shown by the family, the same cannot be said for school (Gonzalez, 2001) which, as we have seen, is not perceived by these young people as an institution that has supported their pathways, even if individual teachers are seen to have done so.

As another factor of success, they also identify the accumulation of social capital through their peer group. For these young people from a minority background, being able to access a certain peer group, whether intra-ethnic or not, can represent a source of social capital that allows them to access school resources and pushes them toward success (Stanton-Salazar 2004; De Hoon & Van Tubergen, 2014). This social capital was also accumulated via participation in formal associations, where they were able to access an explicit message encouraging them to make the most of school as a means of upward social mobility, coinciding with that received from the family nucleus and individual teachers.

However, in the debate on the role of intra-ethnic associations and their impact on the community and social integration processes, some reluctance emerges with the consideration that, far from allowing the accumulation of social capital for success and continued education, they can sometimes promote a form of social control that constrains young people's academic aspirations. That said, our results show that the social capital ensuing from the immersion of family life in the cultural life of the ethnic community can become a factor that promotes positive school pathways and a source of educational continuity in a situation where, like all complex social processes, both advances and setbacks are commonplace.

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