



Interview with an Expert, Spain

María Dolores Gabarrón Lax is a social worker in Ankasó-Alguazas centre and she takes part in the “Impulso” project, an employment and social inclusion programme. She has a degree in Social Work from the University of Murcia, and has had extensive training on intervention with immigrants and family mediation.

1. What are the expectations of minors when they arrive in Spain? Is confrontation with reality or immigration a real problem for the minors in your centre? How?

The main reasons for the children’s migration process are economic. In Spain minors have a clear economic motivation either to find a way to escape from the precarious life situation in their own countries, or to help their families with the money sent. The economic problems of most of children's families are a factor that encourages them to emigrate so that they become the breadwinner in the family.

In addition, migrant minors who arrive in Spain have experienced a migration culture and the desire for a western lifestyle that is often transmitted by their own compatriots, mass media, gangs, etc. In many cases there is an overestimation of leaving their own country as the only option in life.

The culture shock they experience, along with the expectation impact of both the minor and the family of getting into a protection system in which they are considered minors and therefore unable to work and financially support their families, often leads to the minors becoming frustrated.

From the protection centres, coping with the reality and the expectations that once drove them to start the migration process is part of the work programme. It is a hard process that inevitably arises again; therefore it is fundamental that they receive psychological support from the protection system to overcome the migratory grief.



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On arrival to the centre, an in-depth interview takes place, and as much information as possible is collected for the assessment of the minor. Subsequently, depending on each particular case, the practitioners work with the children at a psychological level conducting individual, and group therapy where the needs identified in each one are dealt with, such as phobias, fears, impulse control, etc.

In addition to the psychological interventions, we work with the minors on acquiring basic social skills, supporting them to overcome their adaptation to the host society, thus minimizing culture shock, adjusting their expectations to the reality in which they find themselves.

2. Is contact between the minors and their families encouraged? What type of contact is made? For what purpose? What barriers or obstacles exist?

One of our objectives is to promote relations between the minor, the family and the educational team of the centre.

In the case of migrant minors from the Maghreb there is frequent contact with the families, but this work is difficult in the case of children from other areas such as the sub-Saharan, and often leads to no contact or location of the family.

Family data is obtained, essentially, through interviews and daily contact with the minor. Currently we do not have other mechanisms to collect this information so we consider this as one of the areas for improvement through the development of actions to facilitate family tracing.



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Many of the children arriving in Spain have family support in our country with whom a contact that favours the involvement of the relatives in the process of adaptation and social integration of minors is established. Thus, children that have close relatives willing to be involved in the care and education of children, may visit them at the weekends or holiday periods. Because of this, minors have the opportunity of receiving support, preventing an uprooting of family and enjoying family contexts. It is in these cases where the possibility and desirability of family reunification is studied.

Moreover, it is important to have this family support not only during their stay at the centre, but also when the minors turn eighteen, which is the time of an independent life.

In addition to the family tracing in the country of origin, the main obstacles that we face in our relationship with the family are the language barriers. However, children keep contact with their families regularly provided by the Centre.

3. What are the most appropriate ways to promote their social and employment inclusion into society? What actions have proven to be ineffective in this regard?

The pathways for the social inclusion of children inevitably go mainly through language skills and training.

In any event, the first objective is the acquisition of the minimum language skills to be inserted in the education system. In the vocational training field, the migration project motivation plays a fundamental role, since in those cases of economic reason, frequently occurs a clash between their expectations and actual conditions already



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mentioned above. This is one of the most common reasons for minors' rejection to schooling.

Linked to this rejection, the minors often have a large schooling deficit and/or illiteracy even in their home countries, so that school adjustment is particularly difficult.

Therefore, flexible and tailored training strategies, adapted to their needs in alternative resources, such as initial Vocational Training Programme, are necessary.

This type of training is a very suitable option for most minors, since the average age is around 16 years old, they usually have very low levels of qualifications and the training allows them to approach the world of work through the learning of a profession, giving them the opportunity to gain work experience.

4. **Tell us about the social integration process of children in their immediate environment (response of the host society, participation of children, cultural differences, etc).**

The migratory movement assumes structural changes in society that require innovation and reform to transform the mindsets and beliefs of our society that often include misconceptions about people from other countries.

Awareness of society and the value of what cultural diversity provides in relation to global migration and particularly to unaccompanied minors, becomes necessary.

From our protection centre, coexistence between the local people and foster children is encouraged but we find difficulties as minors tend to relate to others from the same origin country.



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5. **In which cases do you consider the reunification in the country of origin as a convenient measure?**

According to the current legislation on foreigners, the best interest of the child is the priority and the main principle, so that, the return to their own countries would only be appropriate in the case in which the conditions for the effective family reunification of the child are given, or if there would be an adequate protection services in the country of origin.

Returning is a sensitive measure that requires an individual assessment of the personal and family circumstances both in the country of origin and in ours, taking into account factors such as the chances of having a normal and socially integrated life, thus preventing from being forced into marginalization and exclusion.

The main obstacle for the accomplishment of these assessments is little or lack of information on the situation of the country of origin. It is essential to establish mechanisms for locating the families through partnerships with institutions of those countries.

6. **What professional competences do you consider necessary to work with unaccompanied migrant minors?**

Due to the urgent demand for answers to this phenomenon from the point of view of the minors' protection, a network of diversified resources for the reception, care, autonomy, and so on, has been established in Spain. Mediators and educators from the countries of origin have been incorporated to the protection services, and a response has been given to practitioners' training needs, as this represented an unknown field until relatively recently.



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It is necessary to keep on adapting to the minors' migratory phenomenon, to the new minors profile, new circumstances, new needs, new countries of origin, etc. Therefore, training for practitioners is a permanent process.

Professional competencies in related areas, such as psychology, education, social education, social work, social integration, etc, are necessary for the intervention in this context, but, from my experience with other professionals, one of the prerequisites is the personal involvement with the minors.

It is necessary to highlight the awareness raising towards the circumstances that motivate these minors to come to Spain, accompaniment in the process of integration, supporting and encouraging them, and a personal involvement that inevitably arises from a strong professional vocation led to the intervention with children at risk of social exclusion, and more specifically the group of unaccompanied minors.

7. Any other suggestion for the intervention?

We cannot forget that we are talking about unaccompanied migrant minors that arrive in our country and are part of the minors' protection system, but not all children who come to our country are within this system.

In addition to the minors identified, there are others who are completely unprotected. We have no reliable data on the number of children who are outside of the protection circuits. These are minors who slip away from their shelter homes, or who lived in the streets in their home country and have now made this lifestyle choice as a way to stay in our country, starting a life of crime and marginalization in the street.

It can be very positive for these minors to promote projects addressed to street education, as it might be a link for the child protection system through informal education.



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