



This paper is taken from

*Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World
Proceedings of the thirteenth Conference of the
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe
Academic Network*

London: CiCe 2011

**edited by Peter Cunningham and Nathan Fretwell, published in London by CiCe,
ISBN 978-1-907675-02-7**

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Nunes, B. D. L. (2011) The new communication technologies working to promote social inclusion: An action research project with unaccompanied migrant youth, in P. Cunningham & N. Fretwell (eds.) Europe's Future: Citizenship in a Changing World. London: CiCe, pp. 550 - 558

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Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

Acknowledgements:

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- The CiCe administrative team at London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The Lifelong Learning Programme and the personnel of the Education and Culture DG of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

The new communication technologies working to promote social inclusion: An action research project with unaccompanied migrant youth

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Abstract

The new communication technologies (ICT's) have increased in a significant way the influence of media on social relations. If the media, as a social mediator, has interfered in the processes of social exclusion and inclusion in the public space, in the information age the new communication technologies have reinforced this role. At the same time, the new communication technologies have been introduced as an important way to get social visibility, especially to groups at risk of social exclusion, offering new strategies to make their voices heard and other and new ways to be part of the public sphere (Hopenhayn, 2003). Therefore, education should be aware of these changes and should seek educational alternatives that consider the relevance and importance of these new social processes in the construction of a more just and cohesive society. Thus, a modern education should act in the formation of active citizens and be open to cultural diversity. In this regard, this paper presents an action research carried out in Bilbao – Spain, based on the use of ICT's in socio-educational intervention with unaccompanied migrant youth. The main objective is to identify the potential of ICT's as a facilitator of social inclusion among unaccompanied migrant youth. Through the use of audiovisual means as a tool for socio-educational action this research analyse the capacity of ICT to enhance civic consciousness by questioning and reflecting on the role that media plays in the social integration process.

Keywords: *New Communication Technologies (ICT), Media Literacy, Refugee, Youth migration.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Unaccompanied migrant young: who are they?

According to the definition given by ACNUR, the United Nations Refugee Agency, unaccompanied migrant young, are children or adolescents under 18 who are outside their country of origin and separated from both parents or from the persons that by law or custom have been in charge of them. Some of these children are totally alone, while others live with their relatives. They may have applied for asylum for fear of persecution, lack of protection from human rights violations, armed conflicts and/or serious disorders in their country of origin. Others may have been victims of trafficking or other type of exploitation, or may have traveled to Europe to escape situations of

severe poverty. Many of them faced terrible experiences and survived circumstances of extreme hardship. (ACNUR, 1997)

In Spain, most unaccompanied migrant young people are from Maghreb (mostly Moroccan), followed by Romania and sub-Saharan Africa. As pointed out by Mercedes Jimenez (2004, 2003) this is a new phenomenon that should be framed within the logic of international migration and has a number of challenges not only for government administrations of host countries, but also for these teenagers, who see migration as an opportunity to improve their own and their families' living conditions or even as a unique chance to escape a violent situation. Indeed, Jimenez also mentions that it could be considered as a new stage of the Moroccan migration process, characterized by the prominence of young population (*ibid.*).

The reasons that have led a teenager to undertake a migration project are many and varied, but all come from a social inequality and violence contexts that can be structural, political or symbolic. One of the factors that influence this process is closely connected to the lack of resources and acceptable social and economic conditions in their country of origin: the lack of income and poverty make migration to be seen as a real possibility of improving living conditions. Another factor, that is to some extent related to the first one, has to do with the precarious situation of child protection in these countries, that is currently unable to provide answers to the manifestations of poverty in cities and rural areas (Jimenez, 2003)

These young people face, like any teenager, common challenges at this stage of life. However, there are other circumstances that affect dramatically in their social well-being. Once in the host countries, they frequently find themselves in a situation of increasing risk that is especially associated to the difficulties inherent in their immigration status. The specificity of this group has created a legal clash, difficult to manage by governments. This is due to the fact that they are both migrants and minors: on one hand they have to be protected according to the legislation for children in distress in each country, and on the other hand, they are considered illegal immigrants by the Governments. At the same time, they have to deal with a lack of affective models and a very hard aculturation process in an age which they still are constructing their cultural identity. Moreover, the stigmatization of this group and their common connection to the crime and the drug consumption turns to be an additional difficulty for their integration. In this regard, it is imperative to face these new challenge by thinking about new strategies. The first step would be to deepen in the understanding of their social context once in the host countries. Taking this into account, the next action is to think about how to design social-education actions that could help in their integration process. This research project considers that new technologies of communication and the media literacy appear as a great opportunity. In this regard, this research project has as the main objective *to identify the potential of ICT's as a facilitator of social inclusion among unaccompanied migrant youth. Through the use of audiovisual means as a tool for socio-educational action this research analyses the capacity of ICT to enhance civic consciousness by questioning and reflecting on the role that media plays in the social integration process.*

1.2. Unaccompanied young migrants, ICT's and Media Literacy: making possible their positive visibility in the public sphere.

The new global dynamics have furnished important changes in contemporary societies and nowadays the mass media is an important element of the public sphere. The media generates images of the world which create political, social and cultural meanings (Gamson et al, 1992), which invariably affect our social and political perception. These meanings are constructed on the basis of a particular political and cultural project, in other words, under the influence of a hegemony that is not static or, as suggested by Kellner (1990), which is always in dispute. In this regard, it is clear that the media plays an important role in the processes of social exclusion and inclusion. The manner that the media uses to represent a group determines, in most of the cases, their position or their legitimacy achieved in the public sphere.

In the case of migration, some authors point out a tendency in the media to associate immigration with negative issues such as crime, threat, violence, etc. (Van Dijk, 1997). This stigmatization could be very dangerous to the social cohesion because it puts immigrants in a marginal position. Indeed, as noted by Hall (1997, p. 258), stereotypes are a way of maintaining a particular social hegemony: "correcting borders, dividing and excluding everything that does not fit on the hegemonic social construction". In Spain, for example, this is not different. Many relevant studies on the mass media coverage of immigration in Spain have highlighted how the media often refer to migration in a negative way and how this representation may influence the attitudes and judgments of people about this group (Muñiz et al., 2007). Considering the definition of social integration coined by Penninx and Martinello (2006) who state that being integrated means being accepted by the host society, it could be say that the stereotyped way as media represents immigrants in Spain make difficult their integration process.

In this context, ICT's emerge as an important tool to reverse this process. On one hand it is able to facilitate the dissemination of any kind of information, and on the other it could be a powerful tool to provide access to public sphere to minority groups, including immigrants. As noted by Hopenhayn (2003, p.183), "the communication industries have become one of the most important access routes to a large social sector that do not have any space to express themselves, and so to make use of their citizenship". And not only immigrants or minorities, but also young people, who are increasingly using the internet and the cyber space as a platform to express themselves, live and construct their identities and make their voices listened. This is why paying attention to this dynamics is so important and to think about possible actions to reverse this process into educational benefits. In this regard media literacy could give us some clues

As pointed by David Buckingham (2005) media literacy has as main focus helping young people to develop a critical consciousness about mass media. It's about to analyzing how media represents reality and how the audience incorporates and redefines these messages (Morduchowicz, 2003). At the same time, it's important to facilitate their access to this new public sphere in order to boost their participation in political decisions and to make their citizenship effective. That's why is so imperative to teach them how to use the mass media to create new media and cultural products. In the case of unaccompanied migrant youth, the idea is to offer an opportunity to make them visible,

by communicating wishes and feelings, constructing a path for their demands and making possible an environment for social dialogue.

Besides, as a way to build citizenship skills, media literacy could improve their information, analysis and communication skills and clarify the role that mass media plays in the social contexts. At the same time, it works in the creation of an especial environment where they can improve their leadership and creativity abilities, features considered essential to increase their ability to solve problems and be more critical and autonomous persons (Hobbes, 1998).

2. Methodology

The research approach chosen was the participatory action research. A social-educational program based on ICT's and media literacy has been created and throughout it the idea is to analyze the process of making media products by the unaccompanied young migrants and also their relations with the media, as for example the influence that media have in the construction of their identity or how they see themselves as a migrant. The fundamental theoretical approach is the New Sociology of Childhood (Gaitán, 2006; Corsaro, 1997) which considers the importance of making children an active partaker of the research process. It has also some correspondences with the Critical Theory, especially with the ideas of Paulo Freire (2004), focusing on the building a shared knowledge by a dialogic process between researchers and researched. Through the video production and the creation of communicative products focused in the public, democratic and cultural issues, the unaccompanied migrant youth are stimulated to construct a social agenda out of the communication processes, in this case, their own positive visibility. Thus, is about to see how they face these challenges and how they negotiate their positions along the intervention process.

2.1 Datacollectionmethods

The data collections methods have been diverse. These included the participant observation during the workshops of media production, semi-structured interviews with the work group during all the process, discussion groups, brief interviews with the social educational partners and participants, as well as with other audiovisual and media producers. In this regard, the methods of data analysis are based on the audiovisual anthropology and sociology (Banks, 2001; Pink, 2001; Emmison and Smith, 2000). The main aim was to figure out the social relations that led up to the finished product.

2.2 The social-educational program

Another data collections methods was the social-educational program based on the media literacy and designed especially to the research project which was organized in four diferent units (Fig 1). At the beginning, the idea was to create a space of reflection. Here, the ICTs has been used as a platform for the group to think about their identities. At the same time, they have been invited to imagine how people from host society see

them and how mass media represents their reality. In this phase, they also did some practical exercises, such as to make brief interviews with people on the street, which was very interesting to watch them interacting with people. In the second phase the idea was try to make them think on how an audiovisual product could change one situation. At this moment this research project is on the third stage which is making the audiovisual product. The last step is evaluating in a participatory way all the process.

As have been previously highlighted, one of the major goals of this research is to analyse how the media production could help them in their integration process. It's about to figure out issues as identity construction and their relation with mass media focusing in the educational process. As the methodological approach was based on the idea of making their participation a real part of the research process, a participatory evaluation has been organized as a moment to them discuss about the process. In this regard, opening this space had not the aim of making an evaluation of the program, but letting them construct conclusions about the results by themselves. Once more, it's about fostering a dialogic educational context in which they could to identify the media production as a valuable tool in order to facilitate their social inclusion. In other words, to find out what kind of relations they make between the program and their integration process and if they could identify and organize the next steps they should take.

ACTIVITIES GUIDE	
UNIT 1 "Meeting each other" (1 session)	This block will attempt to "break the ice" between facilitators and the work group. Furthermore, it includes the introduction of the workshops and the setting of some standards for good development of work process with the participation of everyone.
UNIT 2 "Analyzing a situation" (3 sessions)	Through specific activities, participants will be invited to think about the reality in which they live in, their migration experiences and the difficulties they have found to get adapted to their new social environment. Thus, the activities have been developed to promote a first contact between participants and the audiovisual language and to think about the place of media in society and how it could be used to facilitate their integration process.
UNIT 3 "Get to work" (8 sessions)	After thinking about the topics proposed in previous units, the activities of this third section are intended to implement an action plan to be developed by participants and facilitators. In this regard, this third section includes activities related to the media production workshop where participants are going to produce the audiovisual products as for example videos.
UNIT 4 "Next steps" (3 sessions)	In this last unit participants should think about their work. This involves making an evaluation of the whole process, trying to link the activities of discussion and reflection with the final product of the workshop, in this case, the audiovisual product. At the same time, it's a space to think about how to spread the work performed using the ICTs as platform (blogs, youtube, etc.)

Fig 1 – Activities guide

2.3 Participants profile

Most of the unaccompanied young migrants who are participating in the research are from Africa. The group was formed by ten teenagers who came here as minors but now are 18 and older and are linked to some social program which has the aim of facilitating their social inclusion. In this regard, the research project has been supported by Hemen Program, which is a platform of some social organizations created specially to attend this group's needs. All of them were boys with some difficulties as was referring to language skills.

3. Results and discussion

This research project is in the middle of the field work phase therefore working on the transcriptions. So, in this part would be interesting to share some issues that have been gotten mainly by the participatory observation and specially related to the whole process of the field work. One of the most important difficulty on the profile of these young people is their language skills. Almost all of them are taking Spanish classes but they still don't have good communication proficiencies on this language. While this has resulted in significant difficulties during the implementation of the workshops, a progressive improvement has been observed in their language skills.

Another important aspect is regarding how they realize the influence of mass media in their daily life. Since mass media plays a meaningful role in the inclusion and exclusion dynamics, it was very surprising to observe that even without being totally conscious of that, they could make connections about the influence of mass media in this process. For example, when talking about daily actions like taking a bus or the subway to come to the workshops, it was very common to hear about some rejection situations from native people. During the discussion time, they could also link this kind of behavior with a negative representation in the news programs. They also have some ideas about migration in which not every immigrant has the same opportunities than other. For them, the latin american group have more facilities to get social resources and be in the labor market than they. These kind of ideas were always driven by some identity issues as religion identity or cultural identity including the colour of skin. In this regard, the way that media represents each migrant groups puts them in a worst position in order to be accepted by their new society. For them, the Latin group is over represented by media as a group which have more skills to be integrated while muslims are not. They also identify that media relate the color of skin with drug sales. For them it is also something that influences their process of dialogue with their new society.

These ideas about a kind of stratification of migrant groups made by the media, especially by news programs, have influenced some activities during the workshops process. During the process, one of the activities was to develop a brief interview with few questions to have been done to people in the street. Some of the group were very worried about talking to people and asking the questions because their physical characteristics, as for example the color of skin. They consider that the physical characteristics influence a lot when interacting with people. One of the reasons to this

perception was their idea that black people and muslims are connected by media as a group that are difficult to be integrated and even a dangerous group. Gradually, an interesting change could be observed. During the workshop sessions they were progressively more self-assured about their identity and making out of the media production an instrument to interact with people without feeling threatened or in a disadvantaged social position. In this way, it was very positive to see how the media activity has given them more skills to dialogue with their new society.

One of the most important challenges of this phase of the research was about their attendance. It was very complicated to have them all participating at the same time in the workshops. Although they were truly motivated for being part of the project, they had many other problems to deal with. In most of the cases the absences were closely related to other needs like job opportunities, training courses, housing difficulties, etc. At the same time, since they don't have any kind of affective reference, like relatives, it is very common to set up peer groups in which they feel comfortable and safe. This is a very common behavior especially in Moroccan teenagers, who needed that their entire peer group were participating in the intervention. Otherwise wouldn't come.

This kind of research could have influenced some changes during the process. The adolescents have their own way to live their experiences, and consequently the themes that we have discussed on the workshops were mostly related to their own needs. This is very productive because they could introduce other insights that, at first, did not emerge as a main issue. For example, in many times we stop the discussion about something else to talk about their possibilities to date someone from here. Actually this was a very important issue for them and has even become a topic of the interviews that we did with the people in the street.

4. Conclusions

As this research still is in the empirical work, making conclusions could be a risk. Since the beginning until now what could be seen is that mass media has a representative influence on their integration process. Not just how media influence the perception that their new society has about them, but how sometimes they do not feel able to interact with it out of fear or suspicion about how they are going to be received or accepted. In other words, their integration problems related to media are not just about how people see them through the media but how they feel themselves or identify themselves as a migrant because of the social representation that media do of them. This is a very important issue because these dynamics can reinforce their marginalized position in the social context. In this regard, the development of this research suggests that making media could be a very good social-educational strategy to change these dynamics and give them autonomy to create their own way to being part of their new society.

At the same time to a social-educational action be successful is important to pay attention to their relations of their peer groups. As the unaccompanied young migrant has a lack of affective models they really need to be together of their peer groups to feel more secure to participate in any social-educational action. In this regard the ICT's have an important role. Another point is that ICT's can be a very good tool to generate motivation

to them participate of the social-educational action. As the ICT's are used by them to live some issues of their identity and also to be in touch with their families. Learning how to explore all the possibilities that ICT's can offer as a communications tools makes the social-educational action more interesting to them. In the same way and regarding social dialogue and citizenship skills as ICT's does not need the real presence to be effective and to make posible the communication process, this feature makes them feel more comfortable to talk to society their wishes and expectations, encouraging them to

Therefore, it seems that the ICT's appear as a important way to be more connected to their cultural background and feeling more secure as well. In this regard the experience up to now suggest that the use of media literacy and the ICTs as a social educational tool it is a very positive way to discuss some issues about identity and how they realize themselves in their new social context. It's also useful to carry on a empowerment process and to foster their citizenship skills, which is very important if we consider that this is one way to promoting their initiative, that is, their capacity for action.

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