

WHEN THE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM FAILS IMMIGRANTS: THE ROLE OF TEACHER ATTITUDES, INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT, AND POLICY IN SHAPING EXCLUSION

Abstract

This study investigates the subjective experiences of immigrants in the Spanish educational system, using a qualitative methodology that combines narrative and thematic analysis.

Twenty-two participants of various nationalities, living in the Community of Madrid, were selected through snowball sampling. In-depth interviews, conducted between May and July 2023, served as the primary data collection method, allowing for a rich, contextual understanding of the participants' experiences.

The analysis revealed six major themes: direct rejection, experiences of invisibility, condescension from teachers, attempts at integration, lack of institutional support, and school segregation based on national origin. The latter theme highlights how immigrants are often concentrated in public schools in economically disadvantaged areas, reinforcing segregation.

The study underscores the challenges faced by immigrant students in accessing equal educational opportunities and institutional support. These findings highlight the need for addressing discriminatory attitudes and improving institutional practices to foster more inclusive educational environments. The results provide valuable insights for developing educational policies aimed at promoting the integration of immigrant students in Spain's education system.

Key words: Immigrants, Spanish educational system, discrimination, subjective experiences

Introduction

Migration, a phenomenon with historical roots, continues to shape societies worldwide, driven by factors such as natural disasters, conflicts, and economic crises, compelling individuals to seek new beginnings (Khan et al., 2019). In the context of contemporary Europe, particularly in Spain, a key entry point from the Mediterranean Sea, migration has become a pressing issue on the political agenda (Lifelong Learning Platform, 2016). Scholarly investigations are exploring the integration of immigrants into host countries, questioning traditional acculturative approaches that emphasize assimilation at the expense of immigrants' traditions and values (Navas et al., 2007; Prinz, 2019; Sáenz-Hernández, et al., 2020). Thus, while these approaches have provided a foundational understanding of migration dynamics, they have often overlooked the structural and systemic barriers migrants face in host societies, such as discrimination and institutional inequalities.

One of the most studied frameworks in migration research—and simultaneously one of the most criticized—is John Berry's acculturation model, which has been widely adopted in research exploring the integration of migrants into host societies (Ward, 2001; Navas et al., 2007; Sam & Berry, 2010). This model conceptualizes acculturation as a bidimensional process in which individuals make decisions regarding the adoption of the host culture and the maintenance of their original culture. These decisions result in four main strategies: assimilation, which involves fully adopting the host culture while rejecting the original one; integration, where a balance between both cultures is sought; separation, which occurs when the host culture is rejected while retaining the original culture; and marginalization, characterized by the rejection of both cultures (Berry, 1997, 2005).

Berry's model has been mostly criticized for its emphasis on unidirectional adaptation to the dominant culture, as it oversimplifies the migration experience and overlooks migrants' agency and the underlying power dynamics. Recent research emphasizes the need to contextualize migrant integration within broader sociopolitical and cultural frameworks.

Structural and systemic barriers, such as discrimination, institutional racism, and restrictive immigration policies, have a profound impact on acculturation processes, often limiting the applicability of Berry's framework (Ferguson et al., 2012; Ward & Geeraert, 2016).

Moreover, some studies argue that acculturation cannot be reduced to a rational choice between predefined strategies, as migration experiences are fluid and deeply influenced by factors such as local policies, transnational ties, and economic inequalities (Schwartz et al., 2010; Rosenthal et al., 2021). Therefore, while Berry's model has been valuable for initial studies on acculturation, it is necessary to complement it with approaches that recognize the

complexity and diversity of migration experiences, as well as the structural influences that shape them (Formenti & Luraschi, 2020; Hoggan & Kloubert, 2021). Scholars like Friedenthal-Haase (2014), Hoggan & Kloubert (2021), Kloubert & Hoggan (2021), and Formenti & Luraschi (2021), among others, advocate for approaches valuing human dignity, autonomy, and diversity, emphasizing social integration that preserves individuality. Relocating to a new country, as evidenced in studies by Sharpe (2016), Qi and Cesetti (2019), and Nada and Araujó (2018), is a complex sociocultural and psychological process, marked by various challenges and identity transformations. Despite these challenges, social support and resources are crucial, underscoring the importance of community in this transformative journey (Qi & Cesetti, 2019).

To fully grasp the challenges migrants face, it is essential to explore the interplay between structural barriers and systemic inequities. Concepts such as discrimination, marginalization, and segregation provide a nuanced understanding of how societal structures hinder the integration process. Discrimination, often manifested through racial or ethnic bias, restricts migrants' opportunities and reinforces exclusionary practices within schools and broader societal structures (Starck et al., 2020). Marginalization, as noted by García-Carrión et al. (2020), deprives migrants of access to full participation in societal life, confining them to the periphery of social, economic, and cultural opportunities. Segregation, meanwhile, is closely tied to institutionalized inequalities, often reflected in the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities across schools, as highlighted by Plenty and Jonsson (2017). These phenomena are interrelated, collectively reinforcing the challenges that migrants face in their daily life and when navigating educational spaces.

Within the educational context, Guerra et al. (2019) underscore the multidimensional nature of marginalization and its interplay with segregation and discrimination through a systematic review. They emphasize that the persistence of these systemic issues often results in cumulative disadvantage for immigrant students, limiting their academic and social outcomes. This aligns with findings from Rosenthal et al. (2021), who argue that the structural conditions within host countries often exacerbate these challenges, leaving little room for genuine integration or inclusion.

Education, on the other hand, often serves as a cornerstone for fostering immigrants' integration and personal transformation. Scholars like Hoggan and Hoggan-Kloubert (2021) highlight the importance of educational practices that prioritize dignity, autonomy, and dialogue, fostering inclusive spaces that benefit both migrants and host communities. Native

citizens, in fact, also benefit, as they perceive themselves as active agents within a diverse society grounded in human dignity and democratic principles.

Such principles resonate with the notion of “the inclusion of the other” proposed by Habermas (1998), which emphasizes dialogical engagement and communicative action as foundations of democratic societies. In this view, newcomers are not merely tolerated but actively recognized as co-constructors of the social order. Education, therefore, becomes a key site for fostering mutual recognition and democratic renewal. Similarly, Biesta (2012) argue that citizenship is not a fixed legal status but a continuous process negotiated through collective learning and deliberation. These theoretical perspectives underscore the aspirational role of education in fostering inclusive, dialogical, and democratically engaged societies.

Beyond this positive perception of the educational context, research on migrant students’ experiences in the school system suggests how they commonly face challenges such as cultural barriers, family and care issues, material needs, educational obstacles, and legal status hardships (Free et al., 2014), in addition to the support from educators in navigating the school system (Free & Križ, 2016). Schools, however, often act as spaces where systemic inequities and cultural biases are reproduced, resulting in processes of racialized subjectification (Phoenix, 2009). Migrants, in turn, must manage differing expectations of schooling (Sharples, 2017), which are not solely associated with language competence. In the specific context of Spain, the role of education is particularly significant given the growing migrant population and the diverse challenges they face. Traditionally, the Spanish Education System has implemented three distinct programs to support immigrant students: liaison classrooms designed to ensure linguistic competence, compensatory education programs aimed at addressing curricular gaps, and diversification programs intended to facilitate entry into the job market (Pastor, 2010).

According to Eurydice (2003), the primary goal of these programs was to address the deficits perceived in immigrant students and facilitate their integration into the educational system. However, these programs have faced criticism for promoting assimilation rather than integration, as they often treat cultural differences as deficits to be remedied (Martin Rojo et al., 2003). This assimilationist approach has raised significant concerns among Spanish educators, who argue that it perpetuates inequalities rather than fostering inclusion (García Castaño et al., 2008).

Despite the acknowledgment in most European states of education's crucial role in integrating migrant and refugee youth (Lifelong Learning Platform, 2016), educational systems often

perpetuate societal inequalities. In Spain, the influx of foreign population has surged, necessitating proactive integration policies. However, educational policies, predominantly managed by autonomous regions, face challenges in ensuring equal opportunities for migrant students. Despite legislative efforts such as Organic Law 4/2000, which emphasizes the integration of foreigners, or Article 17 of Royal Decree 157/2022 on the schooling of late entrants to the Spanish education system, there is a persistent challenge in addressing the deep-rooted social, cultural, and economic problems faced by immigrants (Bonal et al., 2019; Ocampo-Torrejón et al., 2020).

Spain's decentralized model, in which responsibilities are divided between the state and regional authorities, has led to diverse regulations, resulting in a fragmented approach to integration, described as a 'patchwork' model (Martínez de Lizarrondo, 2009). Despite attempts by regional governments to mitigate school segregation through initiatives such as redistribution and the reservation of places for pupils with special needs, challenges persist, highlighting the need for a more cohesive and comprehensive national strategy (Grau & Fernández, 2016).

In Spain, therefore, school segregation remains a pressing problem, requiring coordinated efforts at both regional and national levels to create an inclusive and equitable educational landscape (Sindic de Greuges 2016; Murillo et al., 2017; Bonal et al., 2019; Estalayo et al., 2021).

The current Study

In the present-day Spanish context, both regional and national educational policies have shifted the responsibility of fostering social integration of immigrant students onto academic institutions. Since there is no separate legal framework for migrant families, schools are left accountable for promoting family involvement and supporting the integration of migrant students. Educational institutions are often seen as the primary support system for migrant students and their families. Nonetheless, it is worth considering whether this perception faithfully reflects the reality of classroom observations or whether systemic barriers persist in practice.

While there is substantial research addressing the systemic dimensions of migrant integration, much of it has focused on quantitative measures of segregation and acculturation, leaving a critical gap in understanding the subjective experiences of immigrants.

Existing research in the Spanish educational context has frequently focused on linguistic and cultural acculturation through quantitative approaches, using surveys and statistical analyses

to assess patterns and outcomes related to integration (Carrasco et al., 2013; Murillo & Martínez-Garrido, 2017; Serra & Paludàrias, 2007). For instance, Carrasco et al. (2013) explore segregation trends in Catalonia using school enrollment data, while Murillo and Martínez-Garrido (2017) employ national datasets to examine the extent of school segregation by national origin. Similarly, Serra and Paludàrias (2007) analyze the academic trajectories of foreign students in post-compulsory education through descriptive and inferential statistics. These studies provide valuable insights into systemic trends and structural inequalities but often lack an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences and perspectives of immigrant students and their families.

This study aims to address this gap by adopting a qualitative approach to delve deeply into the subjective experiences of immigrants navigating the Spanish educational system. The main objectives of this research are to explore, understand, and illustrate these experiences across various educational stages, emphasizing the challenges, opportunities, and coping mechanisms reported by participants. Specifically, this research seeks to:

1. Deepen the understanding of migrants' lived experiences within the Spanish educational system, emphasizing their subjective perspectives and trajectories.
2. Explore the challenges and barriers migrants report encountering in their educational experiences, including those related to systemic dynamics, interpersonal relationships, and institutional practices.

To achieve these objectives, this study employs thematic and narrative analysis to examine how migrants perceive their integration processes within the educational environment. In doing so, it seeks to shed light on whether formal educational institutions function as genuine supportive environments or perpetuate subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination based on race or xenophobia.

Method

Participants

The sample size of this study was not determined beforehand but emerged as subsequent data were collected. These followed a snowball sampling procedure based mainly on the strategy of maximum variation (Miles & Huberman, 1994), which entails a sequential and emergent interview process. It also aims to capture a wide diversity of perspectives within the migrant population. This approach allowed us to include individuals with varied trajectories of migration, educational stages, and national origins. While the broader project explores the

full migratory process—from the initial decision to migrate to settlement in the host country—this study focuses specifically on their experiences within the Spanish educational system.

The sample of the study was therefore constituted by 22 adult participants, 14 women and 8 men, originating from nine different countries (Colombia, Romania, Morocco, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, the Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Argentina, and Spain). All participants were over the age of 18 and shared either their own educational experiences in Spain or the educational trajectories of their children.

Participants arrived in Spain at different ages, with some reporting experiences in multiple educational stages, including primary, secondary, vocational training, and higher education, while others focused on one specific stage. A few of them also referenced their participation in adult education programs, reflecting the complexity and continuity of educational integration.

This diversity enables the study to address the systemic and interpersonal dynamics of the Spanish educational system from multiple viewpoints, while also establishing a meaningful connection with the broader field of adult education. Their reflections offer insight into how educational experiences, whether direct or indirect, continue to shape migrant identities and inclusion trajectories in adulthood.

To provide further clarity, Table 1 offers an overview of each participant’s gender, country of origin, and the perspective from which they narrate their educational experience (as student, as parent, or both), as well as the educational stage(s) they refer to.

Table 1

Overview of participant profiles and educational references

Code	Gender	Country of Origin	Perspective (Narrated Experience)	Educational Stage(s) Referenced
P01	F	Morocco	As parent	Primary and secondary
P02	M	Colombia	As student	Secondary
P03	F	Senegal	As student	Secondary
P04	F	Romania	As parent	Primary
P05	M	Venezuela	As parent	Secondary
P06	F	Peru	As student	Vocational training
P07	F	Cameroon	As parent	Primary
P08	M	Equatorial Guinea	As parent	Primary
P09	F	Argentina	As parent	Secondary
P10	F	Colombia	As student	Secondary

P11	M	Puerto Rico	As parent	Secondary
P12	F	Morocco	As student	Primary
P13	F	Romania	As parent	Secondary
P14	M	Dominican Rep.	As student	Secondary
P15	F	Colombia	As parent	Secondary
P16	F	Peru	As student	Higher education
P17	M	Morocco	As parent	Primary
P18	F	Argentina	As parent	Primary
P19	F	Colombia	As parent	Primary
P20	M	Equatorial Guinea	As parent	Secondary
P21	F	Spain	As student	Higher education
P22	M	Dominican Rep.	As parent	Primary

Prior to participating in interviews, all individuals provided informed consent, and ethical considerations were rigorously observed throughout the recruitment process. At the start of each interview, participants were informed that the current study was focused specifically on their educational experiences, while their broader migration experiences would contribute to a larger project.

The snowball sampling method was particularly effective in accessing a vulnerable and hard-to-reach population, as it relied on trusted references to overcome potential mistrust. This was crucial given the sensitive nature of the topic and the diverse backgrounds of the participants.

Instruments and Procedures

The research employed 22 in-depth interviews as the main instrument to explore immigrants' multifaceted experiences within the Spanish education system. Prior to each interview, informed consent was requested from participants, ensuring the voluntariness and confidentiality of their participation. Participants could choose between audio or video recordings, depending on their comfort level and privacy concerns. For those opting for video, the researchers aimed to capture additional non-verbal cues, which will be used for a broader study. In this manuscript, however, only the verbal content of the interviews was analyzed. Participants were informed about the audio or video recording of the interviews to facilitate subsequent transcription and analysis.

During each interview, the authors assumed the role of 'active listeners', facilitating participants' authentic narration of their life stories. The aim was to capture a nuanced understanding of their experiences in their own words. The interviews were semi-structured,

allowing a flexible framework that ensured core themes were addressed while leaving space for participants to freely express their perspectives. Efforts were made to remain neutral, avoiding leading questions to minimize potential biases in participants' responses.

All interviews were conducted in Spanish recorded digitally, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized. Excerpts presented in this manuscript were translated into English by the authors.

Data Analysis

Interviews were subject to multiple readings to comprehensively understand content and context. A thematic analysis as described by Riessman (2008) was implemented, and a narrative approach inspired by Bamberg's study of 'small narratives' (Bamberg, 2004, p. 332). This approach sought to discover not only 'what' was said, but also 'how', 'to whom', or 'for what purposes' participants' narratives were expressed. All the analysis process involved making connections between narrative segments, unravelling patterns and deciphering the meanings constructed by participants. These instruments aimed to capture the rich and diverse stories of migrants navigating the Spanish education system. The combination of in-depth interviews and in-depth analysis provided a holistic exploration of their subjective experiences.

Results

The qualitative findings of our study unveil the presence of a main theme that serves as the overarching framework for all emerging themes.

Simultaneously, this theme not only generates but also encompasses two additional ones.

Thus, at the core of these findings lies the primary theme of **marginalization**, acting as the foundational issue from which the two other topics — **segregation** and **discrimination**— emerge. Furthermore, these two topics, in turn, incorporate and elucidate various specific themes that have surfaced in our analysis.

Before proceeding to the description of the themes and their reflection in the participants' comments, it is pertinent that we elucidate the distinctions between them. In order to improve clarity, we will simplify our description of what we mean by marginalisation, segregation and discrimination following a literature review on these issues.

In our view, marginalisation, segregation and discrimination are interrelated concepts, each with distinct meanings:

Marginalisation implies the exclusion or relegation of certain groups to the margins of society, depriving them of full rights and opportunities. Marginalised people, such as immigrants and refugees, face systemic barriers that limit their access to quality education (García-Carrión et al., 2020). Marginalisation of migrants refers specifically to the systematic exclusion or relegation of people who have migrated to another country in search of better opportunities. This phenomenon can manifest itself in various aspects of life, including social, economic, political and cultural dimensions (Soler-Gallart, 2019).

Segregation refers to the deliberate separation of groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender or religion. Often stemming from broader social inequalities, educational segregation is closely linked to disparities in access to resources and opportunities for minority students (Easterbrook & Hadden, 2021; Boterman, 2018). In schools, segregation is frequently correlated with poorer academic outcomes for minority students (Murillo & Martínez-Garrido, 2017).

Discrimination consists of treating people unfairly on the basis of specific characteristics such as race, gender or religion. This unfair treatment can be reinforced by implicit biases in educational settings, where marginalised students may receive fewer opportunities and support compared to their peers (Cogburn et al., 2011). These biases can contribute to discriminatory practices that isolate already vulnerable groups (Villardón-Gallego et al., 2023).

These concepts are often closely linked and can be mutually reinforcing in situations of inequality and inequity, particularly in educational contexts, where segregation and marginalisation can combine to exacerbate the exclusion of vulnerable groups (Murillo and Belavi, 2018; García-Carrión et al., 2020).

School Segregation by National Origin

Directing our attention to the specific themes arising from the interviews, we can now spotlight the first one, falling under the theme of segregation and labelled as "school segregation by national origin." Numerous interviewees acknowledged experiencing or witnessing the isolation of themselves or their children from the native Spanish student community. This segregation is predominantly observed through the allocation of public schools situated in more marginalized or economically disadvantaged areas, where the enrolment of foreign students is accepted.

Simultaneously, a dearth of foreign individuals is noted in private schools, suggesting, as articulated by the interviewees, that segregation in this context may be associated with economic factors, given the challenges immigrants often encounter in meeting the fees of

subsidized or private schools. Furthermore, instances of segregating foreign children in school group activities are reported, albeit sporadically, underscoring the significance of racial discrimination based on skin colour as a pertinent factor in these occurrences.

The experience of Martina, a participant from Colombia and mother of Sara, can be seen as a clear example of the aforementioned:

Martina: "At school, the majority of Sara's classmates are children from other countries. I'm uncertain if it's designated specifically for foreigners. In Sara's class, there are very few native Spanish students; most are from abroad. It makes me wonder whether the school intentionally gathers foreigners... Yes, at times, I've entertained such thoughts."

In one of his comments, Leo, a participant from Romania, reflects on the segregation experienced by foreign students and families. This segregation is driven by economic factors, as private schools in Spain are prohibitively expensive, making them financially inaccessible for most immigrants.

Leo: "In a public school, there is a notable presence of foreign students. However, most of the student body in private school is Spanish. I believe this dynamic is influenced by economic factors."

Ariel, a participant from Puerto Rico, during the interview reported having noticed the segregation of her daughter at school, because of her skin colour.

Ariel: "It turns out that during the school photo shoot, this teacher placed Melody and another African child together at the back, almost segregating them from the white children. The rest stood where she had placed them, and these two were positioned elsewhere. Then I started noticing the same thing happening in other situations."

Another compelling observation on segregation based on national origin comes from the only Spanish participant enrolled in our study. She shared insights into how Spanish people perceive public and private schools, highlighting the associations commonly made with the types of individuals found in each educational setting.

Diana¹: "Many Spanish individuals opt to enroll their children in private or semi-private (concertadas) schools because they believe that public schools attract students from families with lower economic or socio-cultural backgrounds, diverse cultures, ideologies, or other countries. They specifically desire an educational environment devoid of foreigners whom they may consider inferior, believing that this diversity hampers their children's education, leading to lesser learning and a slowed pace of academic progress. I refrain from opting for a private or semi-private school, as I don't want my daughter to wear a uniform, recognizing that the world is not uniform—everyone is unique."

The experience of invisibility

Another emerging theme is what we labelled as the "experience of invisibility."

In the following comments, it could be observed how this theme suggests experiences of segregation. Some of the interviewed participants, as Mary and George, described feeling ignored in class or receiving differential treatment during evaluations, hinting at a distinction based on their national origin. These patterns of unequal treatment can be interpreted as indicators of segregation, where individuals feel excluded or treated differently due to their cultural and national identity.

Mary: "(The teacher) practically ignored me in class, didn't correct my exercises like she did with the others. She corrected me as if I were more or less invisible, and I always failed, regardless of my effort or how well they were done."

George: "The teachers just ignored me and didn't care about me at all."

Integration attempts

Another theme that arises from the interviews is what we refer to as "integration attempts." These testimonies reflect situations in which the interviewees attempted to integrate but felt excluded. Baby, a participant from Cameroon, mentions how, despite sitting with a group of girls, she felt ignored and not included in their conversations and plans.

¹ "A participant whose nation of origin is Spain, and she is the mother of a kid attending a public school in a working-class neighborhood in the Community of Madrid."

Baby: "When I arrived (at the university) there was a group of very nice girls, and I ate with them. But during the conversations, they didn't include me in the conversations, it's like you don't exist. They talk, they make their weekend plans with each other and you're there listening, and they don't even invite you. So, after a while I decided not to sit with them.

Baby emphasizes that he did not want to be seen as charity and that he did not feel genuinely considered by his peers. Sarah, a Moroccan participant, describes how she attempted to integrate by removing her veil, suggesting that she believed this action might improve her acceptance. However, her experience after removing the veil indicates that the negative perception persisted.

Sarah: "At first, I tried to integrate to the point where I saw that their problem with people was the veil, so I took it off. I took it off during the first week or so. On one Monday I went without the veil to see if they would accept me better, if I would integrate better, and the week I went without the veil I didn't see any difference. They had me marked as a blackberry, and they treated me terribly".

The responses of the interviewees suggest that their peers did not fully accept them due to cultural or identity differences. These narratives indicate an attempt at integration that, despite individual efforts, did not result in genuine inclusion. The lack of acceptance, social exclusion, and the persistence of negative treatment suggest experiences that can be understood as forms of segregation.

Direct rejection

Different participants reported having suffered direct rejection by classmates and teachers at all levels of education because of their origin, skin colour, phenotype, religion.

This rejection was expressed verbally and sometimes with the use of physical violence.

This type of mistreatment based on origin, skin color, phenotype, and religion constitutes discriminatory behavior, which belongs to the major category of **discrimination**.

The comments which appear below, involve racist stereotypes and discriminatory remarks implying factors such as race, nationality, language, and religion.

Ada's comments (a participant from Morocco), for example, illustrates discrimination based on her linguistic abilities. The inability to defend herself due to a lack of language proficiency is exploited, and this vulnerability is used as a tool for further discrimination.

Ada: "It was a shock because I arrived there first with my hijab, the veil, because I am Muslim, I wear the veil, so I wore it. As soon as I started going there, they started to judge me for the veil first, and I had no way of defending myself because I understood everything they said to me, but I couldn't defend myself because I still didn't have that linguistic ability. They are insulting you; they are shouting at you, they are telling you "Go to your country", but I can't defend myself. And it was worse, because they used it as a weapon to attack me even more, because as you can't defend yourself, they keep discriminating against you, they keep insulting you. The worst thing at the beginning was that there was no support from the school, because I went to my Spanish teacher, who was my trusted teacher, and I could communicate with her in French. And she was very, very nice to us and so on, and she passed on all the complaints and grievances that I had to the school. But there was no support, there was no way, nowhere. The teachers said that they didn't see anything in those subjects from Spanish students, they didn't see any discrimination or racism, and the school couldn't do anything."

Ada's description of seeking help from the school but receiving no support indicates a failure in addressing discriminatory behaviours. The school's dismissal of the reported discrimination perpetuates an environment that allows such mistreatment to persist.

Sarah's experience (Sara is a Muslim participant) involves discrimination based on religious practices. Her teacher's demand for her to remove her veil, the derogatory language used, and the subsequent mockery constitute religious discrimination.

Sarah: I tell you, even a teacher told me that "if you don't take off your veil, I won't accept you in my class and as I am forced by the school to accept you, you are there like a piece of shit," she told me, in front of all the students. I had an anxiety attack once, I fainted once in class because they were attacking me a lot, and when I fainted, they imitated how I fainted, they said "here playing the victim, calling everyone's attention". So, in the end it was a very, very hard year.

[...]The insults are related, for example, "asshole, because you don't know how to speak", "shitty blackberry", "because you're worthless", "because so and so". Things, and not only insults, but also acts, like pulling my veil, telling me: "Give me your veil because I want to blow my nose".

In the examples below, it could be seen a teacher making remarks about "Third World countries" when referencing the participants from Cameroon and Morocco, thus perpetuating negative stereotypes based on nationality. In this instance, the teacher engages in a subtle attack, since he seems to offer an apology after making discriminatory and dismissive remarks in the classroom upon noticing African-origin students present.

Marlene: "I had a teacher in the second year (of my degree), and you can see that he was used to the way of speaking with things that were a bit discriminatory. He always said: "Here in Spain we have a lot of solar energy, not like those Third World countries," and then he would look, and I was from Cameroon and my friend was from Morocco and he would say: "Oh, girls, sorry." It happened to him a lot,-and then when he saw us, "Oh girls, sorry", and it's like don't talk like that to apologise. I mean, speak and that's it, why are you going to apologise if you are always going to say it."

Condescension as a relational pattern by the teachers

Another theme belonging to the category of **discrimination**, and which emerges from the interviews is the one we named Condescension. Various participants shared during the interviews that they experienced positive discrimination in different situations. Teachers attempted to be overly accommodating, treating them as if they had issues or were different from other students solely because they were not Spanish or due to their country of origin.

In Dalia's case, teachers excessively emphasized her ability to speak the language well, read Spanish proficiently, and make few spelling mistakes. While positive feedback is generally encouraging, the emphasis on these aspects solely based on her origin or language background suggests a form of condescension.

Dalia: " The teachers with me highlighted a lot the fact that I could speak the language so well, that I could read Spanish so well, that I hardly made any spelling mistakes in the

dictations and that's like why you have to take my mother and congratulate her every time I don't get a single mistake in a dictation?"

Cyndy's experience reflects a teacher's assumption that she might fail, accompanied by an unnecessary comparison to the teacher's own academic struggles. This conveys a presumptive attitude, treating Cyndy differently based on perceived difficulties that may not be relevant.

Cyndy: "Cyndy, how are you doing?", and I said fine. And he says, "If you fail, it's OK, because when I got to university I also failed". And I'm like, okay, you failed, what about me? Why are you telling me this? Like, don't feel bad if you fail because I also failed my first year. And me, I don't care if you failed. Yeah, I didn't even take the extra exam in his subject. I don't understand where this comes from. Well, they're all like that.

Cyndy mentions encountering condescension at the university level, where a teacher expressed surprise at her achieving a good grade. The teacher's astonishment implies lower expectations, potentially rooted in stereotypes or biases related to Cyndy's background.

Cyndy: "Micro racism is everywhere, even at university, there are some professors, ouch, they talk to you with a lot of condescension. I had a teacher, I don't know, I got a 7 or 7 with something in an exam, and she came to see me to tell me how surprised she was. And for me a 7 is like a mediocre grade, it's not a wow. And she comes to tell me that wow, I didn't know I could get such a good mark. And I go to your class, and you expect me to fail, why?"

Lack of institutional or teacher support

The last emerging theme in the interviews is what we term "lack of institutional or teacher support." In the examples reported below, it can be observed how, on different occasions, the participants in our study have experienced situations of emotional limitations, lack of empathy and understanding, and problematic attitudes from teaching staff.

In the case of Vara, the director does not support her due to institutional constraints and resistance from other hierarchical positions in the school.

Vara: We had a director who, the poor guy, didn't really know what he was doing. But for me, the truth is that he was a great support, because with me, he supported me, but I couldn't

do anything, and he told me so. He told me "I can't do anything, because I have the heads of studies, the teachers and so on, who don't support me in what I want to do for you".

In Bubu's experience, on the other hand, the teacher seems to have a limited connection and lacks compassion towards the student. It could be interpreted as a case of discrimination based on the participant's skin color, as he himself asserts in other situations that, due to space constraints, we have not mentioned.

Bubu: I told my PE teacher, she ignored me, she told me that I was very sensitive, that I was complaining too much and that she didn't see anything strange, that we are among young people and that I complain too much and what's more, the next time I complain again, I'm going to get a report, and I said, but this can't be.

In Gerge's case, the teacher exhibits a 'paternalistic attitude'.

Gerge: "I noticed among the teachers that they were not going to do anything to defend our integrity. There was only one who somewhat approached us, a priest who talked to us. But the moment we were not as polite and friendly with him, his colonial spirit emerged. So, his attitude towards us was very colonialist, paternalistic, you know?"

We could consider the lack of empathy, the lack of understanding, and institutional limitations as examples of what is known as institutional discrimination. Institutional discrimination refers to practices, policies, or structures within an institution that have the effect of discriminating against certain groups of people. In the educational context, this can manifest as a lack of adequate support, barriers to the full participation of immigrant students, and the persistence of attitudes that exclude or marginalize certain groups.

Discussion

The increasing presence of immigrant populations in Spain, particularly from economically disadvantaged countries such as Morocco, Romania, and Colombia, has presented new challenges for the Spanish educational system (González de Molina Soler, 2021; Murillo & Belavi, 2018). These challenges, rooted in socio-economic disparities and residential segregation, directly impact the schooling and integration of immigrant students. This study

builds on these findings by exploring the subjective experiences of these students, focusing on how marginalization, segregation, and discrimination manifest within educational settings. Immigrants often reside in specific neighborhoods due to affordable housing and the presence of compatriots. This residential concentration can exacerbate educational inequalities, as it often leads to a concentration of immigrant students in under-resourced schools (Murillo et al., 2017). The findings of this study align with previous literature, highlighting how socio-economic and cultural barriers contribute to the segregation and marginalization of immigrant students in the Spanish education system.

Despite portraying Spain as a dynamic and multicultural nation, there is a noticeable lack of attention given to the primary participants in the migration and acculturation process—the immigrants. Consequently, there is scarce research which amplifies the subjective experiences of immigrants (Prokopiou, et al., 2012; de la Mata et al., 2023), particularly within the educational system in Spain (Giliberti, 2013; Carrasco et al, 2009;). Indeed, national studies on immigrants in the Spanish educational context adopt a quantitative approach, gathering data through surveys, questionnaires, and statistics (Serra & Paludàrias, 2007; Carrasco et al, 2013). Therefore, the present study sought to shed light on several critical issues related to the experiences of immigrant students and their families within the Spanish educational system.

The qualitative approach employed in this research allowed for a nuanced exploration of participants' subjective experiences, providing a deeper understanding of the challenges they face and the dynamics at play within educational institutions. Six main themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews. All of them are not isolated, but they are all interconnected and could be encompassed within an overarching category "marginalization," from which two integrated subcategories derive: discrimination and segregation, as it is reflected in the results.

One of the main themes highlighted is the prevalence of **direct rejection** experienced by many participants. Verbal taunts, physical violence, and discriminatory comments based on origin, skin color, phenotype, and religion were recurrent. The experience of **invisibility** was another significant theme, with participants feeling ignored by peers and teachers, reinforcing a sense of non-existence within the classroom. These findings not only align with previous literature (Strohmeier & Spiel 2003; Von Grünigen et al., 2010; Plenty & Jonsson, 2016) but also raise questions about the effectiveness of current integration policies and to what extent educational institutions are genuinely inclusive. Narratives suggest that efforts to promote

diversity and integration may fall short in addressing underlying issues of prejudice and exclusion.

Consequently, concerns underlying participants' comments become apparent, such as the prevailing and implicit notion, even within the educational context, that integration is unidirectional rather than "a two-way process," as challenged by Habermas (2008, p. 93-94) in his writings. There is also the misconception that acculturation is solely a linguistic matter and falls solely under the responsibility of individuals arriving in a new country.

Our participants, among other things, were **discriminated** against for wearing *hijab*, for not professing the majority religion of the country, for not being fluent in the language or for not being equal to the natives, neither in physical nor cultural traits. Habermas, among others, on more than one occasion, highlights such problems in today's democratic politics, arguing that the purpose of democratic politics should be the inclusion of the other (1999), the acceptance of migrants and their cultures, the non-demand for assimilation of the majority culture.

Migrants should be seen as people whose views bring different ingredients to the democratic conversation (Habermas, 2002, 2009). As for Muslim immigrants, the philosopher makes a special mention, in one of his writings, while expressing his concern about the growing public support in Germany for the idea that the country's future would be threatened by the perceived wrong type of immigrants, particularly those from Muslim-majority countries, asserting that "Muslim immigrants cannot be integrated into Western society against their religion, but rather with it" (Habermas, 2015, p. 273). Furthermore, when talking about migration, in general, he says that a country that welcomes an immigrant cannot prescribe its own cultural way of life (Habermas, 2008).

Condescension, other of the main themes emerged by our analysis, seems to be a complex relational pattern exhibited by some teachers even at university level, involving positive discrimination. Participants reported cases where teachers treated them as if they had issues solely because they were not of Spanish origin. Condescension has been considered one of the four main types of discrimination. Clark, Salas-Wright, Vaughn, & Whitfield (2015), for example, outlined four discrimination profiles: (1) low discrimination, (2) disrespect and condescension, (3) general discrimination, and (4) chronic discrimination. Research by Keith et al, (2017) also identified four discrimination types. Both studies found three common discrimination types: low, high, and condescension and disrespect discrimination, along with one unique type in each study (Clark, et al., 2015: Keith et al., (2017). Furthermore, research indicates that subjects from disadvantaged groups, such as racial and ethnic minorities, are more prone to discrimination due to the unique stigma and prejudice they encounter,

compared to groups of higher **social status** (Meyer & Frost, 2012). In addition, studies indicate that black people consistently report experiencing discrimination more frequently than white individuals (Rodriguez, 2008; Borrell, et al., 2013).

As Starck et al. (2020) emphasize schools are such as a "microcosm of society" therefore, they also are influenced by racism. The presence of racial bias in educational institutions significantly affects students' learning experiences, like in the cases of our participants. Racial bias among teachers, as a contributing factor to racial inequality in education (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Warikoo et al., 2016) is thus a crucial empirical inquiry.

Another significant theme emerging from the results is that, despite the **attempts** of some participants **to integrate** into peer groups, their success was limited. Narratives reveal difficulties in establishing genuine connections, and participants often felt excluded or marginalized in social interactions. Our findings align with previous research on the subject, such as the study conducted by Plenty & Jonsson (2017) or the one carried out by Davison et al., 2016, among others.

The literature on social exclusion in the educational context has broadly demonstrated that experiencing marginalization can significantly impair young people's mental well-being, school adjustment and even their future health (McCormick et al., 2011; Wolke et al. 2013). Furthermore, belonging to an ethnic minority has been identified as a risk factor for peer exclusion (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017). Being similar to others seems to increase the odds of social acceptance, and friendships are often built according to commonality in demographic characteristics and interests (McPherson et al. 2001). By contrast, young people are usually rejected when they are remarkably different from others (Qin et al., 2008; Strohmeier et al., 2011; Méndez et al., 2012;), as is the unfortunate case for migrants. Research, indeed, has demonstrated that young immigrants have fewer friends and are less accepted than majority youth (Strohmeier & Spiel, 2003; Von Grünigen et al., 2010; Plenty & Jonsson, 2016). As mentioned earlier, this raises questions about the effectiveness of current integration strategies and the need for more inclusive initiatives that go beyond superficial gestures. Another key concern raised by participants, which is related to the previous themes, is the **lack of institutional or teacher support**. Even when discrimination was reported, the responses of educational institutions were often inadequate. In some cases, emotional support was provided, but tangible measures to address discrimination and promote a more inclusive environment were lacking. These results differ from research such as the one conducted by Free & Kriz (2016), which underlines the importance of teacher support for migrants in dealing with the various challenges they face in and outside the education system.

These findings, together with our results, could be evidence, for us, that cultural differences are perceived as problems to be addressed and corrected rather than recognized as an added value (Martín Rojo et al., 2003; Habermas, 2010).

Our results, at the same time, seem to clearly demonstrate the lack of adequate preparation among teachers to address the challenges posed by cultural diversity in the classroom. In our view, teachers play a crucial role in fostering the integration of migrant students, yet the evidence suggests that they often lack the necessary tools and training to effectively prevent discrimination and segregation. This underscores the need for targeted, ongoing professional development for educators in areas such as cultural competence and classroom diversity management. Recent research in multicultural education supports this conclusion, emphasizing that teachers require transformative training to effectively navigate the cultural and linguistic differences that are increasingly common in today's classrooms (Formenti et al., 2023; Hoggan & Hoggan-Kloubert, 2023; Tualaulelei & Halse, 2021).

In conclusion, the qualitative results of our study have highlighted the pervasive problem of school segregation rooted in national origin, with participants detailing their observations of isolation within the native Spanish student community. Our qualitative study highlights that **economic factors and residential segregation** are closely interconnected with this phenomenon, indicating that it does not occur randomly. Existing research corroborates our findings, pointing to a possible relation between residential segregation and segregation based on national origin. These studies emphasize the strong inclination of native families to withdraw their children from schools with a significant presence of immigrant pupils, and explicitly point to the concentration of immigrant pupils in public schools. At the same time, private and charter schools show less commitment to the education of vulnerable groups. The exclusion of impoverished immigrants by private and charter schools, as these studies reveal, poses a major challenge to equal opportunities (Frankenberg, 2013; Murillo, F.J., Martínez Garrido, C., Belavi, G., 2017; Murillo & Belavi, 2018; González de Molina Soler, 2021). Importantly, these studies highlight the existence of de facto discrimination, despite legal prohibitions against discrimination based on national origin in publicly funded educational settings.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that although participants shared numerous negative experiences, they did not explicitly report any positive experiences during the interviews. This does not necessarily imply the absence of such experiences but may indicate that the interviews served as a space to emotionally release and reflect on painful events. Emotional interviews often provide participants with the opportunity to process difficult experiences,

which may overshadow more positive memories (Corbin & Morse, 2003). This is consistent with previous research suggesting that people in vulnerable contexts may prioritize narrating their struggles when offered a safe space for dialogue (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

On the other hand, it is also worth noting that, while it is beyond the scope of this study to determine the underlying reasons for this omission, it is crucial to emphasize that educational institutions undoubtedly engage in practices intended to promote inclusion and equity.

However, the persistence of the discriminatory practices detailed in this study serves as a critical warning sign. These findings underscore the urgency of addressing systemic and institutionalized discrimination to create genuinely inclusive educational environments (Free & Križ, 2016; García-Carrión et al., 2020).

The findings of this study not only provide insight into the challenges faced by immigrant students in Spain but also offer a framework for future research in international contexts. By focusing on subjective experiences, this research underscores the importance of exploring the interplay between structural inequalities and individual narratives in other multicultural and migrant contexts. Furthermore, the study underscores the need for comparative approaches that examine how different educational policies, and sociocultural environments influence the integration processes of immigrant populations. These perspectives can inform broader efforts to design inclusive educational practices that promote equity and mutual understanding in diverse societies.

Conclusions

The findings of this study highlight a considerable gap between legislative and institutional efforts aimed at inclusion and the actual experiences of migrant students within the educational system. While this research seeks to raise awareness among educators and other professionals about these challenges, it also emphasizes the importance of equipping teachers, as adults, with the necessary competencies to navigate multicultural classrooms effectively.

Multicultural education, as discussed by Wildemeersch (2016), plays a pivotal role in fostering an inclusive environment where both educators and students can thrive. Teachers must be empowered to counteract stereotypes and prejudices through their daily practices, while also providing emotional and psychosocial support to migrant students and their families (Roets et al., 2012). Such support not only enhances student well-being but also promotes stronger connections between schools and local communities, contributing to the fight against xenophobia and racism.

While this study reveals areas where policy evolution may be beneficial, the findings emphasize the need for gradual and thoughtful adjustments rather than immediate, far-reaching changes. These adjustments should aim to enhance equitable access to quality education for all students, ensuring that schools actively promote inclusion and equality. Schools should create spaces where the unique backgrounds of migrant students are recognized and valued, helping to bridge the gap between educational theory and practice. Moreover, as Wildemeersch (2016) suggests, integrating democratic principles into citizenship education can facilitate greater mutual understanding between newcomers and their host communities.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of using the challenges faced by migrant students as a source of learning to design more inclusive practices. Educational institutions should not only acknowledge the negative experiences reported but also use them to reflect on their policies and actively involve migrant voices in creating solutions.

Furthermore, while this study primarily focuses on the experiences of students, the implications for adult education should not be overlooked. Teachers themselves are lifelong learners, and ongoing professional development is essential for addressing the evolving needs of diverse student populations. By fostering a culture of continuous learning and inclusion, educators can play a crucial role in building more cohesive and inclusive societies.

At the same time, our findings highlight significant implications for adult education targeting migrant learners. Early experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and cultural invalidation can shape migrants' identities, influence their motivation, and affect their trust in educational systems. These effects often persist into adulthood, resurfacing when individuals return to formal or non-formal learning environments. As Eschenbacher (2020) explains, transformative learning in the context of migration requires dialogical spaces where past experiences of dislocation and exclusion can be reinterpreted through meaning-making conversations. Similarly, John (2016) emphasizes that trauma and fear, often rooted in earlier schooling, can pose serious barriers to learning unless educators are equipped to create emotionally safe and inclusive environments. Therefore, adult education must go beyond technical instruction and act as a space for recognition, healing, and agency. This perspective aligns with Gravani et al. (2023), who call for emancipatory and learner-centered approaches that empower migrants to reclaim their educational journeys and engage critically with their life experiences.

Limitation of the Study

The present study has certain limitations to be considered when interpreting the results. Primarily, the use of snowball sampling, while effective in accessing a specific and hard-to-

reach population, may raise concerns about the potential for bias. However, while participants were selected through personal recommendations, the richness and diversity of their lived experiences indicate that their perspectives are unique and not necessarily shaped by their connections. These individuals come from different backgrounds and contexts, which allows for a broad range of insights despite the sampling method used.

It is important to highlight that efforts were made to recruit participants through various means, including associations. However, due to the vulnerable nature of this population, many were hesitant to participate unless reassured by someone they trusted. This mistrust stems from factors such as unfamiliarity with the researcher, limited understanding of scientific research, and concerns about sharing personal information. As a result, snowball sampling proved to be the most effective way to reach participants who would otherwise remain inaccessible.

Furthermore, the sample's focus on certain characteristics, such as geographic location and specific migration experiences, may reduce the possibility of generalizing the results to other populations or educational contexts. However, these findings still offer valuable insights into the specific group studied, and future research may build on this by incorporating a larger and more varied sample.

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