Re-shaping Migrant Students’ Trajectories through Public Policy in Madrid, Spain

Margarita del Olmo

ABSTRACT: This paper focuses on analysing challenges that students coming from different countries face when they come to Spain and continue their school trajectories started in their countries of origin. I use the narrative of one of these students, constructed through ethnographic work carried out in a programme designed to help migrant students ease their transition into the school system of the Community of Madrid. This narrative allows me to introduce some of the challenges these students face and how they re-shape their trajectories and their self-perceptions according to the possibilities their new contexts present them with. With this, I contextualize the case study to show a broader picture of migrant students coming from different countries to stay in Spain during the last decade, and how schools themselves address this situation in Spain, in general, and in Madrid, in particular.

KEYWORDS: education policies, immigrant students, linking classrooms, students’ narratives

Introduction

Out of the total of 113,198 immigrant students in the Community of Madrid (Spain), mainly from (in order) Ecuador, Romania, Morocco, Colombia, Bolivia, Peru, Dominican Republic, China, Argentina and Bulgaria at the time of my fieldwork, I met forty-three children in a special programme to ease the transition of immigrant students into the school system of the Community of Madrid. The programme was called ‘Aulas de Enlace’ (literally, ‘Linking Classrooms’), and I conducted a three-year ethnographic study (2005–2008) in one of the schools where this programme was run. Using the ethnographic life-story technique, I have put together fragments of the incomplete narratives I collected from immigrant students in the Linking Classroom throughout informal conversations during my fieldwork. I will use their stories here to introduce the topic of my paper.

Introducing the Students

The first student is a 16-year-old boy from Romania, who arrived in Madrid and was enrolled in the Linking Classroom where I was doing my fieldwork. He started with no knowledge of Spanish at all, but was able to communicate in Spanish in three months. When I first met him, he was always speaking about his future, dreaming about going to the university to enrol in an engineering school. He graduated from the Linking Classroom programme in three months (instead of the standard six) and entered the last course of Compulsory Secondary Education before the school year was over. He was able to pass the exams and at the end of the school year he could be seen regularly with Spanish kids, speaking very good Spanish. He played the piano and the teachers at the school helped him enrol in a music school to learn to play, even though he learned music and knew how to play the piano in Romania.

During the second school year he was doing the first year of Bachillerato, which is a precondition to enter the University. He looked happy and when I asked him how he was doing, he told me that he had changed his mind about his education. The school recommended him not to do the Science Bachillerato, as was his first plan, but an Art one, due to the fact that he played music. He told me that after this advice he had tried to enter a Bachillerato in music, but his grades...
were not good enough. He said he was happy in the Arts Bachillerato and then planned to go to the School of Art once he entered the University. We spoke frequently about his expectations and his actual academic performance. At the end of that year he told me that he did not think he would be able to get into the School of Art at the university. I told him I was sure he could make it. He was then speaking Spanish with no trace of his maternal language.

In the third year, the first time I saw him he had already taken the first set of exams, failing everything. He told me he was very depressed and that life was really hard on him. I tried to raise his spirits but was unable to. He had passed the theoretical test to get his driver’s licence but he had already failed the practical exam once. Although his father was helping him, it was very expensive to pay for the new fees and extra classes to take the exam again. Some time afterwards, he told me that he took an exam to get into an orchestra, and that he had already passed it, but that this meant a lot of work and that he was thinking about dropping out of school. He said he needed to take a small job and that he was looking for a job as a DJ. When I spoke with him about his expectations, he told me that he was considering forgetting the whole plan to go to university and instead go into a vocational programme. His new hope was then to become a sound engineer, but he did not know how to pursue this career. I offered to put him in contact with my brother-in-law, a sound engineer who was hired by a recording company and received on-the-job training as an engineer. The last time I saw this student, he was about to be hired by my brother-in-law’s former company just for small jobs, and on a trial basis. But at the end, the company closed before he could do any training work. When I asked the teachers about this student the following school year, they told me that he had dropped out completely and that they had lost track of him.

The second student is a 14-year-old girl from China, a very hard-working girl with an outstanding academic level. She wanted to pursue studies in medicine at the university and was aware of the high grades she needed in order to get in. She was enrolled in extra Spanish classes in the afternoon, and reported having a family who expected the best from her. She was very friendly, and spoke good English and Spanish, but was very scared about leaving the Linking Classroom, even though the teacher was very confident that she could easily transition to the regular classroom.

During her last days in the Programme, she was given the task of reading short excerpts on the history of Spain and I used to help her with them. Once she read them she would ask me about the concepts she did not know. On one occasion, after reading one of these texts, she asked me about the meaning of certain words she was having trouble understanding, such as ‘Constitution’, ‘Senate’ or ‘Congress’. She was also worried about the meaning of the letters B.C. or A.C. in the expression 10th Century B.C. or 10th Century A.C. I asked her if she knew who Jesus Christ was, and when she told me she did not, I came up with the idea of explaining it using the concept of ‘Christmas’, which she did know about. In this way we established a common ground and we both did our best to get her ready to approach the subject of history of Spain. I met her again the day after the Christmas holidays when she was supposed to go to the regular course for the first time. She was granted a place in the second to last course of Compulsory Secondary Education, which corresponded to her age. For a long time, she cried and cried every time I met her. She said that it was really difficult and that she was having a very bad time. She finished her course failing only Spanish History and Spanish Literature, and with passing grades in the rest. Then she was promoted to the last course of Compulsory Secondary Education, but was still complaining about how difficult it was. I spoke with the inspector who did the evaluation of the Linking Classroom Programme about her case. The inspector told me she doubted that she could get into medical school, as the student wished; I asked if something could be done for these hard-working students, with excellent academic levels, and speaking different languages. She told me that many Spaniards did not get into medical school either.

The girl started Bachillerato, and I met her any time I visited the school. Always surrounded by friends, she would come to greet me shyly, and when I asked her how she was doing, she always complained about how hard it was. She was failing Spanish Literature and Spanish Language courses, but still trying. She finished Bachillerato but failed the exam to enter university. I lost track of her then so do not know if she re-took the entrance exam or not. In any case she would not be able to go to medical school as was her first choice for so long.

As a way to contrast the paths of the previous students, I present now two students’ cases at the other side of the spectrum: they are both bright kids, but never focused students, nor specially committed ones,
who arrived with no Spanish at all and with what teachers identified as ‘serious academic gaps’.

A 15-year-old girl from Ukraine: she was never a ‘good student’ and had a very good time in the Linking Classroom, although the teacher warned many times about her poor performance and her lack of interest. She started to get serious about learning Spanish and working in the classroom when she was confronted with the fact that eventually she would have to leave the Linking Classroom. She was doing fine for a while, getting good marks and the teacher was satisfied with her progress. She had made a friend at school, a Spanish girl who was a very good student and they became really close. When she was about to finish her stay in the Linking Classroom, her friend told her that she was going to have a rough time in the regular classroom and that she would not be able to understand the teachers. When she heard this, she panicked, and then tried to negotiate a longer stay. When this did not work, she blamed her former school in Ukraine for the lower academic level and for the fact that she had been switched from learning German to learning French, and ending up with neither German, French nor English (which she was required to take in her reference course). When these arguments did not work either, she started failing the exams on purpose, making mistakes even in writing her name. The teacher granted her a longer stay just to take some of the pressure off.

Afterwards, she spoke with an older boy, an alumnus of the Linking Classroom, who told her about the Compensatory Programme. She considered enrolling therein, because this boy told her that this Programme was easier than the regular one. She was finally granted a spot in the school once she agreed to enrol in a course below her age level, since the course that corresponded to her age was already full.

The student ended up in the Compensatory Programme after failing the regular programme, even though it was one course below her age level. I met her from time to time. She said she was doing fine. She was aware that her programme would not let her enter the university, but this did not bother her, since she wanted to get a job. She was speaking Spanish pretty well, and was always around other kids, especially her girlfriends. She did not return to school the following year, even though she did not finish the Compensatory Programme. I lost track of her, and do not know whether she enrolled in another school or dropped out completely without the certificate of mandatory Secondary Education.

The fourth and final narrative introduces the story of a 15-year-old girl from Morocco. She spent a whole year in the Linking Classroom despite the fact that she spoke Spanish very well, but she did not know how to write it well, either in Spanish or in Arabic. This girl had been living with her grandparents in Morocco and according to the teacher she was not attending school regularly there. When she came to Spain, she lived with her parents for the first time in some years. I remember how, in the Linking Classroom, she always had her head down on the table and was feeling miserable. She complained regularly about headaches and at one point she was sent to a family doctor who gave her a prescription for some strong pills, which constantly made her sleepy. The pain showed in her face and, even though she was a very nice person, it was very difficult to work with her. She would refuse to do anything she thought was beyond her reach, and she considered it impossible to do very simple addition and subtraction exercises – which I was sure she was able to do just because she was able to go shopping.

After one year in the Linking Classroom, she was able to write in Spanish very slowly and with some mistakes. When her time in the programme was finished, the teacher thought about the possibility of enrolling her in a programme at a related school which was aimed at children who teachers think would not be able to finish Secondary Education. The programme is called ‘Garantía Social’, and enrolled students older than sixteen but younger than eighteen, who have not qualified to get the Certificate of Compulsory Secondary Education.

When I met this former student of the Linking Classroom in her new school being trained to be a waitress, practicing serving breakfast, she approached me. While she seemed surprised about my visit, she looked totally different: happy and confident. I asked her about her headaches and she told me they were completely gone. She told me she was totally satisfied and looked really satisfied and at ease. After this visit to her new school I lost track of her.

Contextualizing the Stories: The Linking Classrooms

Linking Classrooms is a programme especially designed to address the needs of immigrant students who arrive during the school year in the Community of Madrid. It was implemented for the first time in
February 2003 and administered by the regulations of the Board of Education of the Community of Madrid. An official internal document of the Board of Education of the Community of Madrid justifies the programme as follows:

When sons and daughters of immigrant families enter the schools, they find it more difficult to achieve the objectives of the school system due to several factors. One of the most important factors is a lack of knowledge of the language of instruction, when their mother tongue is not Spanish. In a similar way, the previous schooling in their countries of origin conditions the process of integration into the Spanish school system. It is necessary to point out that these processes are characterized by a broad variation, depending on the social group and on the fact that some of the students come from less developed countries. In some cases, the schooling process could be inexistent or irregular. Finally, it is necessary to consider the socio-economic situation of the immigrant population, and the fact that they often live in precarious and poor conditions.

According to the official data of the Ministry of Education (MEC 2007), during the 2006–2007 school year, there were a total of 7,081,682 students in Spain (excluding universities), and 637,676 of them belonged to immigrant families. The Community of Madrid registered 113,328 immigrant students in all levels of education, excluding the university, for the same 2006–2007 school year.

The programme provides funds to the selected schools for hiring teachers (in the case of subsidized schools) and buying books (Spanish as a Second Language manuals and reference books), other kinds of classroom materials, and a computer. A classroom facility equipped in this way awaits the students’ arrival at the beginning of each school year. These students should have been recently immigrated to Spain; their parents have to approach the schooling commission in their neighbourhood to have their children sent to one school or another.

According to an interview with the staff of one of these commissions, the criteria for selecting children are the same as in regular schools. Sometimes families ask for a particular school because they have relatives and acquaintances whose children attend it, and I was told that the commission listens to this kind of request. Students are not only sent to a particular school but assigned to a reference course, according to their age and academic level. This level is never definitive, and once they finish their stay in the Linking Classroom, the tutor will also have a say about the level to which they will be assigned. This school level can never be more than two years under or above the actual age level.

The programme is not mandatory. Parents are advised to send their children to a Linking Classroom if the students are not able to speak Spanish or, even if they can (i.e. if they come from any of the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America), when they have significant academic gaps. Students are supposed to stay in the Linking Classroom until they know enough Spanish to follow regular classes and up to a maximum of six months. The regulations for 2006–2007 (Consejería de Educación 2006) extended the maximum regular stay from six to nine months.

Linking Classrooms are classified into two types: primary and secondary ones. Primary Linking Classrooms include school children from third to sixth grade of Primary Education (from nine to eleven years old). Secondary classes gather children who are twelve to eighteen years old. After the first weeks, the students in the Linking Classroom are supposed to attend some classes with their reference course, such as Physical Education, Music, Technology and Plastic and Visual Education. In the last two regulations, mathematics was also added. This is mandatory by law. Nevertheless, this programme does not officially enroll students. I was surprised when I found out through fieldwork that these students do not appear on the schools’ official enrolment lists. The whole programme is regulated by the Board of Education of the Community of Madrid, and after it was implemented experimentally in 2003, it was the subject of a three-year evaluation carried out by a commission of inspectors. The evaluation, which was supposed to be continued one year later (but never was), was totally positive about the programme and issued some recommendations for improvement.

Similar Education Policies in Other Parts of Spain

All of the Autonomous Communities in Spain have, at this point, developed some kind of recommendation or partial programmes to address diversity. As in the case of Madrid, these programmes define diversity as a lack of something: language of instruction, physical or psychological handicaps, behaviour disorders, academic gaps or immigration background. Different programmes usually group the students thus defined
together and afterwards apply the programmes developed for diverse students. However, only Murcia, Andalusia and Catalonia have a programme similar to that of the Welcome Schools or Linking Classrooms. My knowledge of these policies is not as in-depth as my knowledge of the Madrid policy where I have carried out an ethnographic study. But in a different context, I had the opportunity to read their regulations, interview some teachers, and compare them to the one in Madrid. Nevertheless, I would like to point out their main differences in order to provide the reader with a broader context to understand the case of Madrid better.

In Andalusia the program is called ATAL, which in English stands for Temporary Classrooms for Linguistic Adaptation. The Community of Andalusia makes it explicit right from the beginning that the programme focuses on learning the language; it is designed for a two-year period (instead of the six months/nine months in Madrid), even though the regulations encourage teachers to graduate kids as soon as they are ready; students are classified in different levels according to their knowledge of Spanish; teachers do not belong to the school, they are hired directly by the programme; and finally teachers are responsible for several ATALs from different schools at the same time. Studies point out the separation between ATALs teachers and the rest of the school as the main shortcoming of the programme, since regular teachers assume migrant students are ATAL teachers’ responsibility and not their own (Ortiz Cobo 2011).

The Autonomous Community of Murcia has developed different policies to address diversity in schools, and Aulas de Acogida (Welcome Classrooms) is the one designed for students who do not know the language of instruction, namely Spanish. These Aulas de Acogida have a three-phase programme. First, students participate in an intensive course to learn Spanish. This lasts up to three months for a maximum of 21 hours per week, including a peer tutor activity. Second, students learn Spanish in different academic courses. For a maximum of one whole school year, some of the subjects are taught in the reference courses corresponding to the student’s age level. In the third phase, students are placed in part-time alternative groupings to solve academic gaps after the second phase. Although this programme is more concretely developed, in practice it is very similar to that of the Community of Madrid. Perhaps the main difference is the peer tutor activity. Another difference is what the regulations say about teacher training; teachers for the Aulas de Acogida are required to have been previously trained in Intercultural Education, and in Spanish as a Second Language – something which is encouraged but not required in Madrid. The Government of the Generalitat of Catalonia has designed the most extensive programme to address diversity in schools, and it is the one which is most different from the Community of Madrid programme. The first significant difference is that the policy to address diversity in Catalonia is included within an Integral Plan of Citizenship and Immigration. This Plan defines citizenship based upon three concepts: (a) pluralism, (b) equality, and (c) community spirit. The second striking difference is that there are published documents and documents ready to download from the website which define the principles and guidelines for what is called Pla d’acollida i d’integració (Integration and Host Plan) for schools. These documents clearly define what should be done, how and when. The third difference I want to point out is that the policy places students coming from outside Spain and students from other parts of Spain together in the Aulas d’acollida (Host Classrooms). This is because the language of instruction in Catalonia is Catalan instead of Spanish. As for differences in content, the documents speak about addressing emotional needs, they reinforce the relationship of the Host Classroom students with their peers in the reference group, and they make interactive methodology within the classroom mandatory.

However, it is necessary to point out that none of these programmes, not even the ones in Catalonia, ever speak about the students’ mother tongues or pay any attention to them. This is one of the main differences between these programmes in Spain and in other countries such as Austria, and the U.S.

The Issue of the Maternal Language

The regulations of the Linking Classrooms Programme do not state anything about the students’ mother tongue; they only focus on learning Spanish as if it were a totally different process. Teachers do not know how to deal with students’ maternal languages, so they simply do nothing. The evaluation of the Programme contains no reference to the question of the mother tongue at all.

The tutor of the Linking Classroom where I did my fieldwork usually placed the recently arrived students with others who speak the same language whenever she can. In doing this, she is not considering their need
to speak in their mother tongue; it is only a matter of practical communication, and this arrangement is totally reversed as soon as teachers think the time is right. I do not mean that mother languages are just forgotten. I mean that they are seen as an obstacle for learning Spanish, as if the capacity for learning a language is fixed and a new language must be learned by displacing the former one.

This zero-sum model has been argued against in countries with longer-term experience with immigrants, and their programmes to address ‘diverse’ students who speak a language different from the language of instruction. Studies have emphasised that the deeper the knowledge of the mother tongue, the easier it is for a person to acquire a new language (see for example the reviews provided by Moran and Hakuta 2001 and Minami and Ovando 2001).

Policy-makers in the Community of Madrid and elsewhere in Spain have not paid attention to the academic work in the field, nor have they manifestly benefited from the experiences of other countries in dealing with cultural diversity in the classroom. Educational policies related to immigrant students operate under the assumption that learning the language of instruction is one of the main tools for a broader social integration; as such, public funds are spent assuming that learning the language of instruction is the only tool to reach immigrant students’ integration in the school system.

During my fieldwork in the Linking Classroom, the mother tongue of the students did not play a role in the learning process. Teachers only consider it a resource as a tool to communicate, when they ask other students to translate for the newcomer, or when they display sentences from the different languages of the classroom on the walls of the room, as a decoration. Only once did a teacher bring a tiny magazine in Romanian to class, but merely for the Romanian kids to produce abstracts of the articles in Spanish. As a general rule, mother languages are strictly forbidden in the classroom; only some teachers enforce this norm all the time and they all try to convince the kids that it is better not to speak their languages, not even at recess or at home.

Teachers spend a lot of time reminding students about the rule, but they enforce it in much more subtle but efficient ways. Any time a conflict arises in the classroom, the question of the mother tongue is likely to be mentioned and blamed for problems such as lack of communication, lack of respect for one another, lack of respect for the teacher and for what she is teaching, and so on. The tutor of the classroom told me one day during recess in the teachers’ dining room, smiling while she spoke, that she was very proud of what one of the students had just told her: ‘He said he was forgetting how to speak Romanian, and for me that means that he is really speaking Spanish at last’. In contrast, I want to quote what another student, visibly sad and worried, told me on a different occasion, that she could no longer communicate with her grandparents, since she had forgotten how to speak Ukrainian.

Expectations on Students’ Academic Performance beyond the Linking Classroom

Official regulations of the Programme do not include expectations for the students once they finish. They just speak about ‘integration into regular programmes’. The evaluators of the Linking Classrooms do not say anything about their expectations for students either, but they clearly expressed their thoughts (and, hence, their own expectations) once when they were speaking about the opinion that the heads of the schools had about the Programme. Explicitly, they issued the following recommendation:

It is necessary to provide adequate economic support for Compensatory Programmes, since at least 50% of the Linking Classroom students will be schooled in these programmes for the last two courses of Compulsory Secondary Education.17

So, it is assumed that 50 per cent of students in the Linking Classrooms will end up in Compensatory Education programmes. This presents a rather different scenario than the one that immigrant families keep in their minds to justify their migratory move seeking a better education future for their children. The evaluators recorded the following data for students who were in the Linking Classroom from September 2005 to April 2006 whose reference course was the last year of Compulsory Secondary Education (in Spain, it is called fourth year ESO – the acronym in Spanish stands for Compulsory Secondary Education). Once they left the Linking Classroom, they were schooled as follows: note that more than 50 per cent of the students enrolled in fourth-year ESO are following (in the words of the evaluator ‘will have to follow’) Compensatory Programmes which would not get them into Bachillerato, the Secondary courses required to enter the university.
So if the Linking Classroom Programme succeeds *only* in getting approximately 22.5 per cent (the total after subtracting the number of students who leave the schools, plus the ones who enrol in Adult Education, plus the ones who drop out, plus half of the percentage that will finally be enrolled in Compensatory fourth-year ESO) into *Bachillerato*, it means that approximately 82.5 per cent are sent directly, or after some vocational training, into the job market without a chance at higher education. Students born outside Spain represented only 2.1 per cent of all university students in the 2007–2008 school year (MEC 2007: 20), and this figure includes exchange students as well. I wonder if we can still speak about the Linking Classroom as a programme aimed at integrating immigrant students into the regular school system of the Community of Madrid, since it leads students mainly into the job market.

In sum, based on my fieldwork, the results of the Programme show that it works well with students whose expectations are set on the job market from the beginning: it provides almost half of them (of the 45 per cent enrolled in fourth-year ESO) with a Compulsory Secondary Education Certificate, which allows them to enrol in a vocational programme, and that means that almost half of them could get some official training for their future jobs. The Linking Classroom programme also works with those who may expect to go to the university but somehow, while in the Programme, change their minds and focus on getting job training or simply on jobs.

Based on these numbers, I also conclude that the Programme not only does not help the students to get into the university but re-shapes or indeed crushes the expectations of those who came to Spain with good academic skills and a strong work ethic. Even in the cases of the few students who get into *Bachillerato* courses, I perceived through my fieldwork that they went through a process of dramatically lowering their expectations to adjust to the expectations other adults at school had for them, but I also perceived that they felt really bad about it.

An institutionalized assumption that immigrant students will enter the workforce instead of higher education seems to be the only way to explain all the positive remarks about the programme and evaluators’ satisfaction with it. This also explains why teachers think students are doing well when students themselves think otherwise and look depressed. Though teachers mean well and want their immigrant students to succeed, their expectations are very low. Well-meaning teachers love and care for students and try hard to build a nurturing environment in which students could feel at ease, but they still consider students’ diversity and migratory experience to be powerful shortcomings for accomplishing high social expectations. They blame unstructured families, poverty, isolation, the amount of time parents spend working long shifts outside their homes, and thus leaving young teenagers alone with a dangerous power to decide about what they want to do in their free time. Even if students are not actually experiencing any of these circumstances, they just blame immigration – as if immigration per se were a legitimate cause to explain the unequal opportunities education provides for Spaniards and immigrants. However, the way the Linking Classroom is presented to the public is as a programme aiming at educational equality for immigrant students, regardless their origin, within the school system in Madrid.

### Opinions about the Programme

In spite of the very positive opinions on the Linking Classroom Programme expressed by evaluators, teachers, school principals, other teachers in schools, the staff of counselling services, and students enrolled in Linking Classrooms which I have analysed elsewhere (Del Olmo 2009), I would like to take a deeper look here at the comments on the Programme produced during my fieldwork in the Linking Classroom. These comments stem from teachers of the Linking Classroom itself, teachers of the same school but outside of the Programme, and students currently participating in it or who have already left it.

The teacher leading the Linking Classroom where I did my fieldwork is totally in favour of the Pro-
gramme, but she also had an important criticism to make. She told me from my very first interview with her on June 15, 2005, before she even allowed me into her classroom, that the Programme is aimed only at developing students’ communicative competence, but disregards the focus on the academic content that would assist students in their transition to regular schooling. This is, according to her, a huge mistake. She repeated this criticism in many informal conversations we later had, mainly in the teachers’ dining room. Each time she pointed out the negative consequences of neglecting academic contents. She said that students should not only learn Spanish to communicate, but Social Sciences in Spanish, Maths in Spanish, Environmental Sciences in Spanish, and so on. She also told me that methods for teaching Spanish as a Second Language also neglect academic content, and that a whole programme should be developed to pay attention to academic content. She also stated she could do this, if only she had leave from the classroom for several months. However, she carried on with her job in the middle of this tension, between official expectations and her own expectations, and doing her best to manage both at the same time. When she speaks about the relationship students develop with the Linking Classroom and with her, she usually pictures it as an umbilical cord. And when she sees former students of the classroom coming back for frequent visits and in search of her advice, she says that they are not able to cut this umbilical cord. In this way, she provided me with an image of what she thinks the Linking Classroom is: a womb where the kids are getting ready to be born into society, as if they were actually born there. I have analysed this metaphor in a former paper (Del Olmo 2007), because it provided me with meaningful ideas about her perspective towards students: kids were re-born there – at the expense of their past. My main criticism of this idea was that students were already teenagers and to have them thinking about themselves as babies to be born (or to be considered as such by their teachers) does not help their process, despite all the good intentions and excellent work, because what they have done or who they have been until this moment is not taken into account.

Another teacher who substituted for her for almost a whole school year never complained about the Programme’s lack of academic content. She also was totally in favour of the policy, and reflected on her experience in the Programme as rich enough to orient her future career as a teacher towards it. She also had complaints about the programme, and many self-criticisms regarding her own role. She complained about being alone in the school, unable to speak about or share her worries concerning the students with anyone. She felt too isolated within the school. Regarding her own role, she felt that she had not done enough to push students to integrate with the rest of the school. She said that, for her, integration had priority over academic content, but she often spoke about integration as if it were a two-fold process: first integration among the students of the Linking Classroom itself, and afterwards, with the rest of the kids in the school. I think this is what made her think about integration as her first priority, hence her feeling of not pushing these kids enough to participate in the rest of the school, as well as regarding students’ attendance to their reference courses.

Other teachers in the school seldom referred to the Programme in general. Instead, they would bring forth the case of a particular student, and discuss it. Only once did I come across an open conversation in the teachers’ dining room, which I recorded in my fieldwork journal, and which showed different criticisms these teachers had about the Programme. This occasion was particularly important because it involved a heated and long-lasting discussion among an entire group of teachers. One of them started complaining about the fact that students from the Linking Classroom are supposed to enrol in a regular class in spite of the academic period within the school year. So some students enter just three months before it is over. The teacher of the Linking Classroom explained that the goal of the programme was to make students ready to join their regular corresponding classes as soon as possible. One teacher responded saying that this period of time might fill the expectations in an office but not in a real school. Then a different teacher complained that if you expect immigrant kids to finish a whole school year in three months, then something was wrong: either Spanish kids were really slow learners, or the immigrant kids extremely bright, and that he had no problem admitting that the last scenario was actually the case. Another teacher showed some evidence to the contrary, saying that when these students start their regular classes they do not understand enough, and for that reason, the whole class has to be stopped or slowed down to explain things to these kids twice. Another teacher, on a different occasion, complained to me about the lack of discipline in the Linking Classroom, and the effect this had on students when they started their regular schooling.
She concluded that these kids slowed down the rhythm of the class because of their behaviour problems.

Students themselves had only positive remarks, whenever I asked them about the Linking Classroom. They always said they feel good, that they have good teachers and also good classmates. Some of them wish they had more classmates from the same countries, who spoke the same language. They were not familiar with the Programme regulations or with the Spanish school system, apart from the occasional experience of a brother or sister. They did not complain, but in many ways they tried to delay or avoid going into a regular class, both during their stay in the Linking Classroom when they had to go to their reference groups, and when they were about to exit the Programme. These could be some of the experiences which reinforced the tutor’s idea of the Linking Classroom as a womb. I may have criticized the metaphor of the womb, but I have to admit that it provides us with a very accurate idea of how the Programme works. In spite of my criticisms, the Linking Classroom takes adolescents, treats them as babies who are not even able to speak, and attempts to re-shape them completely, by changing everything: their past experiences, what they know, the language they speak, and even their expectations and their families’ expectations for them. After completion, the Programme delivers them to a place where they see a huge door leading to the lower jobs of the labour market – and a winding narrow tunnel at the end of which there is supposedly a promise of a university education and after it, better jobs, even. Is this fair? Do we care if it is? Should we?

Conclusions for Further Debate

Let me reframe my last questions: Is this the kind of programme (and the kind of effects) society wants to put its money into? Is this type of education policy aiming at the strengthening of democratic and egalitarian society that we envision for the present and the near future? An excellent analysis of the transformations that have taken place in Spanish society during the last decades of the twentieth century, undertaken by Inés Alberdi, concluded arguing that:

A remarkable issue among the transformations is that – in Spain – social inequalities have been significantly reduced, and that Spain is currently among the countries which have the lowest level of inequality [...] Spain ranks among the first positions [in Europe] as a balanced society, one in which the richest 20% get increasingly less of the total percentage of the income [...] Spaniards seem to be extremely sensitive to social inequalities. (Alberdi 1999: 376, my emphasis)

Inés Alberdi published this work in 1999, when immigration to Spain was becoming numerically significant – compared to other EU countries. But it has been during the first years of the twenty-first century that public policies have started to address the issue of how this new population is participating in society, with a special concern about how institutionalized barriers prevent this participation from being fair and full.

The MIPEX or Migrant Integration Policy Index (Niessen et al. 2007: 164) clearly states that in Spain, ‘Migrants are more likely to be employed than Spaniards, although they are twice as likely to have temporary contracts’.

The explanation of this – only apparent – paradox relies on the kind of jobs they get: mainly in the informal sector, with meagre wages and no security in spite of their qualifications (Observatorio metropolitano 2007: 125–6). These are jobs Spanish citizens do not want, but which need to be taken care of by immigrants, because they are mainly related to the vacuum in the social and caregiving sectors left by women when they entered the job market. When women left home to work outside (a recent phenomenon in Spain compared to other EU countries), they started demanding a more egalitarian share of gender roles at home: cleaning the house, preparing meals, caring for clothes, nurturing children, and taking care of the elderly. Their male partners, raised in a society where gender roles were more clearly distributed, assigning the work outside the home to men and the socially less valued tasks inside the home to women, have come to terms with the more egalitarian ideology only to a certain point. They accept the new balance of gender norms but are not willing to take over their share of duties at home, which they were taught to despise as males when they grew up.20

The tension between these two sets of values has been conveniently solved by hiring immigrants desperately seeking jobs and accepting the wages middle-class Spaniards can afford. These kinds of jobs have not been filled by Spanish citizens, in spite of the high unemployment rate, because the pay is not enough to make a living that meets national standards. This new system of job distribution works only if one can profit from differences of currency value among countries. However, this implies living far
below acceptable living conditions by anyone’s definition – immigrants included; people can put up with these conditions only because they are perceived to be temporary. The recent and rapid social transformations in Spain have taken place since – and no doubt influenced by – the entrance of Spain into the European Union in 1986. This fact made the country even more attractive for immigrant workers, and the kinds of jobs which were offered due to the transformation mentioned provided immigrants with the opportunity to enter the job market more easily than in other EU countries.21 The combination of these processes, and especially the possibility of transforming them into complementary ones, explains – as I see it – the accelerated pace of arrival of immigrant workers and their families that has been characteristic of the recent years in Spain better than traditional arguments, even though the deep current economic crisis has caused immigration to plateau (but not plummet). This fragile but profitable (for the host society) equilibrium is challenged by the fact that immigrants are not only workers but social human beings who, like other human beings, already have families or wish to start families.

Despite Spain’s high ranking in terms of integration according to the cited MIPEX (Niessen et al. 2007: 166), family reunion policies are far from being ‘good practices’. In Spain, immigrants have the right to apply for family reunion after one year of legal residence and if they have a legal work contract longer than one year (note that due to the kind of jobs immigrants have, mainly in the informal sector, it is not as easy to get a one-year legal contract as it may seem). On top of these requirements, immigrants have to prove that they have financial security and living conditions considered adequate. If the petition is not granted by the authorities, immigrants do not have the right to appeal (Niessen et al. 2007: 166). Even if they are not granted the right to bring their sons and daughters – or other kin – to live with them, immigrants manage to reunite their families anyway, as is the case for most of the students in the Linking Classroom where I did my fieldwork. As soon as the kids arrive, and once they register in the municipality where no other proof than proof of residence is required (electricity bills, bank statements sent to the address, etc.), they have the right and the duty to attend school up to 16 years of age, regardless of their own and their parents’ legal status.

When immigrant parents start the process of enrolling their children in the school system of the Community of Madrid, they are offered the option of following the Welcome Schools Programme, which – like similar programmes in other Autonomous Communities – was implemented on 20 January 2003, and aims at dealing with the differences policy-makers identify as the most important disadvantages that prevent immigrant children from achieving fair participation in the school system.

The Programme provides immigrant students with a transitional environment which slows down and eases their full entrance into the school system, and where they learn Spanish. But in the same environment, unfortunately, children also learn to perceive the unequal role and poor value society assigns to them, and the low expectations the system has for their academic future. As we have seen above, this is commonly legitimised by their lack of knowledge of the Spanish school curriculum. Whatever the expectations they – or their families – come with, these are re-shaped, together with their self-perceptions, in order to prepare them for low-level academic training and, as a consequence, a low slot in the job market. All of this happens in spite of the fact that ‘Spaniards seem to be extremely sensitive to social inequalities’ (Alberdi 1999: 376, my emphasis).

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Margarita del Olmo Pintado is an anthropologist and senior researcher at the Human and Social Sciences of the National Council for Scientific Research (CSIC), Madrid. E-mail: margarita.delolmo@cchs.csic.es

Notes

1. Data provided by the Secretary of the head inspector in an interview conducted on 11 May 2007. Latest data show that the number of migrant students in schools in Madrid has plateaued, since for the academic year 2011–2012 there were a total of 111,239 migrant students (12.9%) in the Community of Madrid, fourth Community in Spain (Comunidad de Madrid 2013: 13–16).
2. The interview was conducted on 8 March 2007.
3. In fact, it is the only programme, but it is listed in an internal document with the rest of the agenda of the Community of Madrid to address diversity. This list is not public and was kindly made available to me by a worker of the Community of Madrid who prefers to remain anonymous. For an analysis of these programmes, see Del Olmo (2007).
5. This document was made available to me thanks to special permission from the head inspector of the Community of Madrid, interviewed on 11 May 2007.
6. This data was made available to me thanks to special permission from the head inspector of the Community of Madrid on 11 May 2007. Current data on migrant students per year and autonomous communities are provided yearly by the Spanish Ministry of Education, last published data (Ministerio de Educación, Cultura y Deporte 2012–13) are available: http://xa.yimg.com/kq/groups/10376637/1861040863/name/Datos+2012-2013.pdf (accessed 17 April 2013)
7. In the case of public schools, one and a half teachers (that is, one full-time teacher and another part-time one) are provided directly by the Board of Education, which also selects the applicants.
8. Interview conducted on 14 December 2006.
9. Determined on the basis of previous school certificates and a preliminary test.
10. However, only those youngsters who are not yet sixteen when they finish the Programme can enter the regular school system. Older ones could remain until they are eighteen, but after their stay in the Linking Classroom, if they want to pursue further education, they have to follow programmes for adults. This difference is marked by the rule of mandatory schooling until age sixteen in Spain.
11. An interview with the head inspector allowed me to read the documents on 11 May 2007. n 8 March 2007, I was also able to interview the person who chaired the Evaluation Commission (See Del Olmo 2009).
12. For a review of programmes for addressing diversity in Spain, see a short analysis in Gil Jaurena and Del Olmo (2009), and a comprehensive study in García Castaño and Carrasco Pons (2011).
15. www.gencat.net/benestar/immigracio/web_ac/index.html
17. Unpublished document made available to me by the head of the Board of Inspection of the Community of Madrid on 11 May 2007.
18. On 13 February 2006, according to my fieldwork journal.
20. See Alberdi (1999) for a full development of this argument.
21. This is why the case of Spain is a useful example for thinking about recent social transformations in EU countries, since it is easier to detect and analyse them, due to the rapid pace of change.

References


