religions

MDPI

Article

Challenges of Religious and Cultural Diversity in the Child Protection System with Children Migrating "Alone" in Catalonia and Melilla

Montserrat Freixa Niella [1], Francisca Ruiz Garzón [2], Angelina Sánchez-Martí [3,*] and Ruth Vilà Baños [1]

[1] Department of Research Methods and Diagnosis in Education, Universitat de Barcelona, 08007 Barcelona, Spain; mfreixa@ateneu.ub.edu (M.F.N.); ruth_vila@ub.edu (R.V.B.)
[2] Department of Research Methods and Diagnosis in Education, Universidad de Granada, 18012 Granada, Spain; fruizg@ugr.es
[3] Department of Applied Pedagogy, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Barcelona, Spain
* Correspondence: angelina.sanchez@uab.cat

Abstract: Cultural and religious diversity in Spain, driven by recent decades of migratory flows, has not been exempt from generating social tensions and, unfortunately, an increasing stigmatization of migrant children. This article examines how power dynamics and exclusion impact the identity construction of these young people, particularly within the child protection system. Through interviews and focus groups with young people and professionals in Barcelona and Melilla, this study highlights the resistance strategies these young individuals employ to counteract stigmatizing narratives. The findings indicate that, despite inclusion policies, imposed labels reinforce their vulnerability and limit their social and community participation. Although interfaith dialogue is proposed as a tool to mitigate these tensions, professionals working with these children emphasize the lack of institutional support and insufficient training in socio-cultural diversity, which hinders their efforts. The study underscores the importance of developing interfaith competencies that foster mutual respect and recognition, concluding with a critique of the current protection system. It advocates for a comprehensive approach to addressing these young people's emotional, social, and spiritual needs beyond solely legal and educational aspects.

Keywords: migrant children; unaccompanied migrant children; child protection system; interfaith dialogue; stigmatization

Academic Editor: Brendan Hyde

Received: 6 November 2024
Revised: 5 January 2025
Accepted: 19 January 2025
Published: 22 January 2025

Citation: Freixa Niella, Montserrat, Francisca Ruiz Garzón, Angelina Sánchez-Martí, and Ruth Vilà Baños. 2025. Challenges of Religious and Cultural Diversity in the Child Protection System with Children Migrating "Alone" in Catalonia and Melilla. *Religions* 16: 109. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16020109

1. Introduction

Cultural and religious diversity in Spain has become increasingly visible due to migratory flows over recent decades (Burchianti and Zapata-Barrero 2014; Martínez-Ariño et al. 2011). Spain receives immigrants from numerous countries, with a notably uneven distribution across its regions. Melilla, located in North Africa, serves as a key entry point into Spain and the European Union, and primarily receives immigrants from this continent, especially Morocco. Before 2020, Melilla experienced significant daily crossings by Moroccan youth and an influx of unaccompanied minors, leading to overcrowded reception centers—for example, 3757 minors in 2017 compared to just 115 in 2021 post-pandemic. Barcelona, on the other hand, is a cosmopolitan city with a rich history of migration, drawing people from Europe, North Africa, Latin America, and Asia. It functions as a primary destination where many unaccompanied minors ultimately seek integration into the child protection system. The migratory process creates a continuum of care, with

Melilla representing the entry and reception phase and Barcelona focusing on longer-term integration efforts. These two locations are deeply interconnected, with policies linking their respective roles in migration management and child protection, though the frameworks governing these regions differ significantly (see Rinaldi 2019).

Despite Spain's historically "tolerant" policies toward migrants, the rise of far-right movements has fueled an atmosphere of tension and polarization, hindering coexistence and exacerbating social fragmentation (Cabezas 2022). In this context, young migrants—particularly those who migrate unaccompanied—find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position. They face not only the inherent challenges of migration, but also heightened experiences of exclusion and stigmatization, which amplify existing power inequalities, especially during adolescence (Vilà et al. 2021). These dynamics complicate the development of secure and resilient identities, as social structures often perpetuate their vulnerability and limit their opportunities for participation and recognition within society.

For unaccompanied minors (who are particularly vulnerable due to their intersecting identities as young people, migrants, and often members of religious minorities), interreligious dialogue is recognized as a vital tool to alleviate tensions inherent in social diversity and foster a more inclusive sense of belonging. Developing interreligious competence is crucial in this context (Alemany-Arrebola et al. 2024). This competence entails not only understanding diverse worldviews and religious practices, but also navigating and communicating across differences, cultivating empathy and respect for the religious experiences of others (Vilà et al. 2020a).

Identities in Tension Within Multicultural Societies Aiming to Promote Interreligious Dialogue

Young people naturally experience complex, multifaceted identity formation processes (Iglesias 2013). According to Erikson (1968), identity is shaped by continuity and internal coherence; however, in postmodern society, these ideas have shifted towards discontinuity, fragmentation, and transition (Tahull 2016). For young migrants, especially those who migrate unaccompanied, this process is further complicated, as they must reconcile their religious beliefs and practices with the norms and expectations of their new environment. This dynamic highlights identity hybridity, a phenomenon that reflects both the complexity of identity in a globalized world and the profound inequalities shaping social and cultural interactions. Hybridization allows young people to negotiate their identities by incorporating elements from various cultures, yet it can also heighten tensions when social structures impose restrictive and stigmatizing labels.

The challenges of migration—such as social exclusion, discrimination, and insecurity—often stem from entrenched systems of oppression that perpetuate the vulnerability of young migrants (Suárez-Orozco 2019). These young people not only face struggles for belonging in a new society, but also deal with the fragmentation of their identity brought on by the migration experience. How communities, educational institutions, and public policies respond to these dynamics significantly affects the emotional and psychological well-being of young migrants. In this context of "superdiversity" (Meissner and Vertovec 2014), the interaction of multiple social categories in urban spaces reveals persistent structural inequalities shaped by social class, ethnicity/race, gender, age, and other factors. Within this framework, the identity of young migrants becomes a "patchwork" (Bhabha 1994), an amalgam of experiences, beliefs, and practices that must be continually reshaped.

In recent years, various terms have been used in Spain to describe children and adolescents arriving in the country without their families. These labels include "unaccompanied minors" (Save the Children 2003), "unaccompanied, undocumented foreign minors" (Capdevila and Ferrer 2003), "unaccompanied migrant minors" (Quiroga et al. 2009), and "young people who migrate alone" (Vilà et al. 2020b), among others. Although the term

"unaccompanied foreign minors" (MENA) is commonly used in specialized literature and public administration (Giménez and Suárez 2000; UNICEF and CGAE 2009; UNICEF 2021, 22nd August), it has also acquired negative connotations that reinforce their vulnerability. The social perception of these young people is often shaped by three dimensions of vulnerability: being a non-EU foreigner, being young, and lacking documentation—factors frequently used to justify the violation of their rights (Berganza 2003). This perception is further reinforced by narratives that portray them as "idle adolescents" dependent on the child protection system.

The identity construction process for unaccompanied minors is profoundly influenced by these social dynamics and institutional structures. Howarth (2002) highlights the significance of representations in identity formation, describing identity as a continuously evolving construct shaped by external perceptions. Similarly, Stuart Hall (2003) emphasizes that identification processes are inseparable from the concept of "otherness". Recognizing the interdependence between identity and otherness highlights how imposed labels and definitions can restrict young people's ability to self-define and explore their identities in migratory contexts.

As new frameworks for religious education emerge, this article aims to explore how social dynamics and representations influence identity construction among children who migrate "alone" in two key migratory Spanish contexts, examining the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering more inclusive identity narratives. It emphasizes the importance of addressing the dynamics of power and exclusion that shape these young people's experiences and significantly influence their identity formation. By tackling these dynamics, the goal is to foster social cohesion and support the creation of more just and inclusive communities. In this context, the White Paper on intercultural dialogue proposed by the European Union defines dialogue as a process of respectful and open exchange of perspectives between individuals and groups of different ethnic, cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds, based on mutual understanding and respect.

2. Results

Testimonies collected from interviews and focus groups in both Barcelona and Melilla reveal that the social perceptions and labels assigned to these young people directly impact their self-perception and how they negotiate their identities. While promoting intercultural and interreligious dialogue with unaccompanied migrant children is a significant step toward improving societal perceptions, it also presents a substantial challenge for professionals working to support the needs of these young people.

2.1. "Moro", "Moreno", "Negro", "Morube"! Effects of Stigmatization and Social Exclusion

The use of terms like "moro" to refer to migrant minors from the Maghreb in Spanish society creates a stigma that profoundly affects the perception and identity of these young people. The repetition of this word, used in a derogatory manner, fosters rejection and resistance among migrant adolescents, serving as a label that dehumanizes and homogenizes their identities. This categorization strips them of their individuality, reducing them to mere "others" and ignoring their complexity as individuals.

An adolescent living in a shelter in Barcelona vehemently rejects this designation, asserting his right to be recognized as a whole person: "I don't like this word because I have a name. My family calls me by my name; it has gone through many things, this name is attached to a person" (d2, bcn4, ref1). This statement captures the pain and frustration experienced by young people who find themselves confined to labels that not only diminish their complexity as human beings, but also highlight their social vulnerability and lack of recognition.

However, the findings indicate that young people employ resistance strategies to affirm their identity and personal dignity in response to this stigmatization. One adolescent described how he chooses to ignore these insults, focusing instead on what he considers essential: his personal history, which those who insult him know nothing about.

> Someone who doesn't know your history, who calls you a Moro or calls you a nigger or something like that, is not worth listening to. I don't listen to anyone (. . .) I hear insults and everything, but it's not worth anything to me. I just play soccer and go home, and that's it because they don't know my story; they don't know who I am. They are treating me as "other", and so, it is worth noting to me because they can't fully understand someone because of their color or their identity. No, that's no good. (d2, bcn2, ref1)

These responses demonstrate a clear intention to distance themselves from the labels imposed upon them. Another form of resistance involves reinterpreting the meanings of these terms to appropriate them in a more positive context. For instance, a young man living in a supervised apartment stated that he does not mind being called "Moro" as long as it is done with respect. This suggests that he has grasped the concept of otherness, recognizing that the term "Moro" acknowledges his identity as someone different.

> The truth is that when I use the word Moro, I'm talking about myself. I don't know what my colleagues think, but I'm talking about myself. The word Moro or MENA does not bother me, as long as there is no disrespect. (d2, bcn3, ref1)

This stance reflects a strategic acceptance of their identity, where the term "Moro" is redefined and can serve as a sign of otherness that is either positive or negative, depending on the context.

However, there are variations in the use and perception of these terms based on geographic location. Some young people explained that while the term "moro" is more commonly used in Melilla, they are also identified with additional labels such as "negro" or "morube", the latter being a derogatory term referring to "moro de campo". One young woman, currently outside the DGAIA (Dirección General de Atención a la Infancia y la Adolescencia) circuit, expressed her resignation: "Yes, in Melilla, it is very common; they call us morubes because we are from Morocco. As in, a country moro" (d2, bcn7, ref1). Another young man from Melilla shared his experience with the term "moreno", which he finds discriminatory: "Yes, we are all morenos! But we don't all have the same heart" (d2, mel1, ref1).

These comments illustrate that otherness does not manifest uniformly; rather, it takes various forms depending on individual experiences and social contexts. The labels "moro", "negro", and "morube" reflect a process of dehumanization and exoticization that perpetuates the divide between young migrants and the society that hosts them. This dynamic fosters an environment of discrimination and exclusion that not only hinders their full inclusion, but also restricts their ability to express themselves fully as individuals.

Echoing the observations of Lopez-Reillo (2011), young people feel confined within a narrative that depicts them as "the boys who came on a boat" while simultaneously defining themselves as "minors housed in a center". These narratives deny them the right to shape their own identities beyond these restrictive labels. However, their capacity for resistance and ongoing quest for recognition reveals a strong desire to break free from these impositions.

Professionals from various types of centers also highlight the existence of racist attitudes toward young people. Most of these attitudes are observed in public spaces—some originating from police forces—but they also note, albeit to a lesser extent and not in all

centers, instances of rejection from the neighborhood, schools, or professionals in the social field. For example, the testimony of one educator suggests:

> You are with them on the train, and you hear some comment, "These blacks should go home". (. . .) Our center has a terrace, and the boys were using it. A gentleman who must have been bored at home came to say that the boys couldn't use it because we were in lockdown. But the terrace is private, and therefore we could use it, to which the man started yelling at them that they only came to steal. . . the typical phrases of "these fucking niggers", sadly, let them go back to their country! . . . a list of nonsense (. . .) especially because of color, unfortunately, there are quite a few situations of racism. (g3, bcn14, ref1)

The most common racist reactions in public spaces involve disparaging or offensive comments directed at youngsters, accusations of theft, and instances of being expelled from stores. Educators in shelters, residential centers for intensive education (CREI), and those outside the protection system highlight the constant state of suspicion in which these young people find themselves. In public, they are also subjected to questioning by police forces, which some professionals describe as police abuse:

> They explain to us, they tell us what happens to them at police controls, even comments made by the police, or they feel offended (. . .) they are aware that they are subject to institutional racism and also social racism. (g3, bcn6, ref1)

Educators from emergency and first reception centers report experiencing racist attacks against their institutions, into which police have intervened, highlighting the neighborhood's rejection of their presence in local communities. One center faced as many as four attacks, which were violent acts carried out by local residents or members of extreme right-wing political parties. These aggressors threw objects at the building and hurled xenophobic insults at the young people. In some cases, the attackers arrived armed with sticks, stones, and knives: "We suffered a racist attack from local people; around twenty hooded individuals came in with sticks and stones to assault the kids" (g3, bcn12, ref1). The educators at these centers emphasize the shock these attacks cause, affecting young people and the educational staff.

To a lesser extent, there are reports of rejection by the school system, either once these young people are integrated (in early education centers) or when attempts are made to connect them with educational opportunities (in housing units for those aged 16 to 18). Moreover, professionals in centers outside the protection system indicate a lack of accountability from the Administration regarding integration and protection efforts.

2.2. The MENA Category: Another Stigmatizing Label

The use of the term "MENA" (Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados) contributes to the stigmatization and criminalization of these young people, as it is often a category unfamiliar to them. This label is employed in media and public discourse to create a negative and stereotyped image of their behaviors and characteristics. Many had never encountered this term before arriving in Spain, even though it is one of the most commonly used labels for these youth. A recently arrived boy residing in a reception center in Barcelona clarifies this disconnect: "*I don't know what MENA is; it's the first time I've heard this word*" (d2, bcn5, ref1). This lack of familiarity with the label "MENA" highlights the gap between how society defines these young people and how they perceive themselves. Many educators interviewed emphasize the need to move away from the "MENA" label, stating, "I don't want to make the mistake of labeling them. They are just kids, and each one is different, with their own needs" (g3, bcn10, ref1).

> I shy away from the label MENA, okay. For me, they are young people. I don't care where they are from, whether they are from here in Barcelona, Morocco, or wherever. In the case of, and I open quotation marks, the MENA collective, I would identify a common characteristic: fleeing. (g3, bcn8, ref1)

In Melilla, the "MENA" label is used similarly, with equally negative implications, as expressed by this professional from Melilla:

> From experience, it happens. Both lived and reported. Because there are people who tell you, "I have seen a MENA who has tried to rape a girl, I have seen a MENA who has robbed such and such a store, I have seen a MENA who has stabbed such and such a person to steal money, and then, well, that creates a kind of fear in you, that is, it creates a direct rejection. And, apart from experiences, maybe, like Yuse, who had his cell phone stolen, well, that also creates fear, after all. (d2, mel5, ref4)

As the gathered testimonies indicate, boys and girls view the term as another form of dehumanization due to its impact on their daily lives. However, as noted in the previous section, many young people also reinterpret their feelings about being defined by imposed labels. This is reflected in the words of a boy from Melilla who has been in the center for some time: "*It is normal that they call me MENA; it means that I am in the center, although people do not look favorably on us, this will change when I go to the peninsula*" (d2, mel2, ref1).

2.3. The Construction of the Stereotype: "All Moros Are Thieves"

The young people interviewed clearly recognize how the labels mentioned above perpetuate negative and stereotypical perceptions, reinforcing a view that associates them with criminal and violent behavior. According to Lopez-Reillo's research (Lopez-Reillo 2011), there is a notable consistency in the social image projected onto migrant minors from the Maghreb, depicting them as ill-intentioned and rebellious. This image contributes to their exclusion and delegitimization as individuals with rights. One young man articulates this sentiment as follows:

> There are people who think that we are all the same, everyone steals, everyone... many people say that the children at the center are all thieves, I don't know how many, but there are many people here at the center.... (...) I don't say that we are all good; there are bad guys, and there are good guys (...), but all the people think that the kids at the center are thieves. (d2, bcn1, ref1)

Their accounts reflect not only the perception of criminalization they endure but also the existence of a collective judgment that disregards the individuality of each young person, relegating them to a shared negative identity. Minors residing in shelters or supervised housing are often viewed as a homogeneous group of "bad" or "dangerous" individuals. An educator in Melilla echoes this sentiment:

> At first, at least for me, I was a little shocked. Because it is true that all the stereotypes, the prejudices affect many. The first day, there was already a quarrel, workers against MENAs, and the boys were throwing stones, all angry; I didn't know why, someone threw a stone at my head, and, well... yes, it was a show, and of course, you enter without knowing anything, well, you are a little shocked. But then, as time goes by, you get to know them, you get to know their story, a bond is created between them and us, and I don't know... and it's like the vision changes a lot, you see them for what they are, children, after all. At first, I was shocked and a little scared because I am an integrator, and it is wrong to say it. Still, I had my prejudices because I had had experiences of having a phone stolen. I said, "Look, they come here to steal from us; they don't come here to do

> anything else". Still, when I went in, I started to get to know them, especially with the children; I started to get to know them, especially those who spoke my Tamazigh language, because those who spoke Arabic, well, I had a lot of trouble understanding them. Still, those who spoke Tamazigh told me their story, some of them were even neighbors of relatives of mine from there, from Morocco. I don't know. . .. one perspective I had of them was that it seemed like another side; it was side A, and when I saw side B, it was nothing like what I was thinking, everything changed. (d2, mel7, ref1)

Many young people reiterate the existence of these stereotypes and challenge the injustice of such generalizations:

> Here, people have stereotypes; they say that all Moroccans steal, but that is not true; each one is as he is (. . .) We are all people, and each one is as he is. Everyone steals, everyone, not only the moros, not only the blacks, everyone steals. They are stereotypes; they say they steal, but everyone sees what they want. (d2, bcn2, ref1)

> People talk, and the police come. The MENA wants to steal! The MENA wants to steal! You know? But I don't want to steal from anyone. This is no good; I don't want to steal anything. I'm walking with people peacefully, and people think I want to steal. (d2, mel4, ref1)

> Many people, when they see me, put their phones away or, if they have a bag, put it away; they think I am a thief. (d2, mel3, ref1)

In the face of homogenization and in an effort to dismantle imposed labels, their stories illustrate a strong need to be seen as individuals rather than as a group defined by prejudice and discrimination. However, the ongoing portrayal of migrant minors as potential delinquents and the framing of them under the label of "thieves" creates a hostile and violent environment, further affecting their migratory experiences and processes of identity construction. Being viewed through this stigmatizing lens denies them the opportunity to be recognized as full citizens.

> When I hear them call us MENA, I feel that they already have an idea about me before they meet me. They don't see me as a normal person but as someone problematic. I have a hard time talking about my religion or who I really am because they think I have no future here. (d2, bcn3, ref1)

Even from some interviews with educators, a certain cultural essentialism has been identified, specifically concerning young people from Morocco to whom violent behavior is attributed:

> Right now, there is still a hotel in which there are about 80 kids from Senegal and Ghana, and that's why it's still standing. But if 80 guys from Morocco were put in the same hotel, it would have exploded the same day. (g3, bcn9, ref1)

However, many educators, echoing the sentiments of the young people, strive to counter these negative perceptions held by others:

> The collective concept does not sit well with me because each person is unique; they do not fit into one category (. . .); they are children. If I think about the two groups, if I had to include them or put them in a category, I couldn't because they are completely different. (g3, bcn11, ref1)

2.4. Media Echo and Social Networks: Building Fear and Rejection of Child Migration

The stigma attached to all of the aforementioned labels is continually reinforced by the media, which often amplifies the stereotypical and racist representations previously men-

tioned. Young people are also aware of this dynamic. A young man from Barcelona, who is part of a basic social care team, criticized how "their" criminal behavior is generalized:

> . . . if they see a video on YouTube or Facebook, well, they think that Moroccans are all the same. For example, earlier, I saw a video on YouTube that a Moroccan stole a chain. How do they know he is Moroccan? How do they know this guy is Moroccan? How do you know? There are many people, including Spaniards, who also steal. Everyone, how do you know it is this Moroccan guy? (d2, bcn1, ref1)

Other boys from a juvenile center in Melilla expressed similar discomfort regarding the stigmatizing perceptions that are portrayed on television:

> "The other day we saw on television that they were saying: -"a brown guy" has stolen the backpack of a girl from Lidl (. . .) and I feel bad because we are not all like that (. . .) everyone does not have the same heart" (d2, mel1, ref2). . .) and I feel bad because we are not all like that (. . .) everyone does not have the same heart" (d2, mel1, ref2); "the media talk about the MENAs, and they say that we are all thieves". (d2, mel3, ref2)

These experiences highlight how media discourses and social networks perpetuate a homogeneous and negative image of these minors, contributing to a hostile social environment that reinforces their exclusion. A young man living in a supervised apartment also expresses how the impunity of virtual environments, along with the lack of direct contact and understanding among individuals, further facilitates the proliferation of racist expressions directed at these young people:

> On social networks, well, you do suffer racism, but when you go out on the street, it depends on which place you go, you know. Because. . . I don't know how to explain it. But on social networks, when a person is behind a screen, they can do what they want. Why? Because they are behind a screen and are not in direct contact with the person. But when you are outside, not so much, you know. (d2.1, bcn3, ref1)

As we have seen, racism and structural discrimination against migrant minors in Spain are expressed not only through language, but also in societal attitudes and behaviors toward them. The social construction of the "Moro" and the "MENA" is rooted in the perception of these young people as a threatening otherness, which contributes to their ongoing social exclusion. However, the testimonies of the young people reveal a strong capacity for resilience and resistance to these categorizations as they strive to assert themselves as individuals with legitimate rights and aspirations.

2.5. The Role of Spirituality and Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue in the Child Protection System

The role of educators and professionals working with these migrant minors reveals a series of challenges that extend beyond daily interactions and individual efforts to foster inclusion. Despite the goodwill and dedication of these professionals, it is clear that there is a need to rethink the child protection system concerning the experiences of these young people, particularly in light of the systemic challenges highlighted by Rinaldi (2019), who underscores the critical gaps in safeguarding unaccompanied migrant minors' human rights within Spain's current framework.

First, educators must continue recognizing and combating societal prejudices and stereotypes that directly impact their work. As demonstrated, the categorization of migrant children can lead to a simplistic approach that fails to account for the complexity of their experiences. In this context, Troller (2007, p. 16) noted years ago how "in interviews with authorities in the Canary Islands, including representatives from child protection services,

children are systematically stereotyped, divided into positive and negative categories once in care. Moroccan children were described as difficult, problematic, unwilling to work or study, unwilling to accept female staff, and only interested in making a living". This perception of them as "difficult" and "problematic" overlooks the realities of their migratory journeys and the socioeconomic contexts from which they come, creating barriers to the support they need.

Supporting these young people must be grounded in a perspective of respect and recognition that celebrates their individuality and avoids reinforcing existing stigmas. However, the current approach, often based on generalizations, can hinder educators' ability to build trusting relationships. One youth in Melilla expressed this frustration: "Do you think that here in Melilla, in the center, they are really helping you? Not much. Sometimes. When I ask for help, I don't get help" (d2, mel5, ref1). This type of testimony highlights the disconnect between the intentions of educators and the lived realities of young people.

Though recognized and respected, the religious dimension of these young people is often treated superficially. As one early childhood educator with over six years of experience noted, "Young people are 'Muslims to the core', but when it comes to religion, they are more influenced by a sense of 'this is my culture, this is my tradition'; traditionally, it was done this way in my home, but they do not know, they have no expertise" (g2, bcn6, ref1). Based on the interviews conducted, and considering that most participants come from Morocco, the religion they refer to is Islam, with many identifying as Muslims. One young person stated, "We are Muslims, almost all of us" (b4, bcn1, ref1), while another added, "We are Muslims, but we do not practice anything. . ." (b4, bcn3, ref1). However, there is diversity in how they practice their faith. It is interesting to note the distinction they make between cultural belonging and religious identity with respect to Islam. For instance, they affirm their lack of practice but still acknowledge their observance of Ramadan when they say: "Yes, in the month of Ramadan" (b4, bcn3, ref1). Most educators interviewed emphasized that "although they do not engage in daily religious rites, they observe significant dates such as Ramadan and the Feast of the Sacrifice, where the religious dimension becomes more pronounced" (g2, bcn3, ref1). This reveals a lack of commitment to an inclusive educational approach that recognizes the complexity of these young people's religious and cultural identities. Professionals, along with the system as a whole, should be trained to understand this complexity, recognizing religion as a cultural dimension that can provide a sense of belonging but may also be misunderstood or oversimplified.

It is clear that the protection system must also take a more active stance in promoting the awareness of religious and cultural diversity—not only among young people and the professionals who support them, but as a shared responsibility across society. This requires fostering collective, inclusive responsibility. Recognizing that these young people carry "a heavy backpack" of traumatic experiences highlights the need for a more holistic approach within the protection system. One educator said, "We have to be strong, but at the same time, very empathetic. . . putting ourselves in the child's shoes" (g2, melé, refl). This approach involves addressing not only their legal and educational needs, but also their emotional and spiritual well-being. It calls for both a shift in educators' daily practices and a restructuring of the child protection system to emphasize inclusion, empathy, and respect for cultural and religious diversity as core elements of care for migrant children. In this context, spirituality can serve as a source of resilience and meaning; but its management in the current context seems to be insufficient, as Andrade (2017) suggested. One educator reflected on the complexity of this issue.

> Whoever wants to practice religion is totally free to do so; we provide all the resources, for example, if they ask for Halal meat or when they have asked us for equipment to pray, such as carpets. The only thing is that we do not teach Islam; we understand that it does not concern us, right? We do work on the social aspect. When there is a homophobic comment, we intervene, 'Well, Islam does not say this', because many times it is a cultural misinterpretation. (g2, bcn11, ref1)

This suggests that educators need to be equipped to address not only religious practices, but also the misconceptions surrounding them. Some educators note the limited training they have received on issues of immigration and diversity, as one professional explained:

> In the end, there is so much diversity in Africa that from here, we are incapable. I mean, my idea of Africa before meeting these guys and now has nothing to do with it (. . .) I have learned a lot from them, so much from them. (g2, bcn13, ref1)

However, educators demonstrate considerable sensitivity and openness, particularly those with more than two years of experience. Intercultural and interreligious dialogue has the potential to be a valuable resource for navigating these dynamics. Although educators across all types of centers and services unanimously view interculturality as an important aspect of their work, the absence of a coherent and systematic approach to managing these interactions can lead to inconsistent outcomes. One educator noted, "The intercultural dimension is our subject matter. . . it is what we work with" (g2, bcn12, ref1). However, it is also clear that these initiatives are not implemented uniformly. External programs that promote reciprocal cultural understanding are helpful, but should not replace a strong institutional framework. Such a framework would ensure that all professionals are equipped with the tools needed to work effectively in a diverse environment. One educator shared that, in his center, they celebrate "the days of each culture, with a calendar that includes the Gypsy population, the new Amazigh year, etc.". (g2, bcn6, ref1). This represents a commendable effort to integrate diversity into the center's activities. However, while celebrating cultural days is meaningful, it can remain superficial, serving as a mere acknowledgment of differences without addressing the structural inequalities young people face.

As one educator pointed out:

> Thanks to the external programs and initiatives conducted outside, it is going quite well. They understand a lot about our culture, and we understand a lot about their culture. We have learned a lot, and we have reached very intermediate stages to the extent that we have a boy who, I always use him as an example, is a casteller. (g2, bcn14, ref1)

This represents a positive, though limited, approach to interculturality focused on cultural exchange, which emphasizes mutual learning and adaptation. However, this type of interaction often remains one-dimensional, centered solely on culture without integrating other layers of identity such as gender, social class, or migratory status. For example, the case of a young "casteller" (a person who participates in the human towers, a tradition typical of Catalan culture) may illustrate an achievement in cultural integration, but it fails to consider how other aspects of identity might influence the young person's experience and their actual access to opportunities.

It is also critical to consider how the spirituality and religious beliefs of these young people are managed in a context often perceived as secular. Although educators demonstrate respect and inclusion toward religious practices—such as accommodating prayer times during Ramadan, with some saying, "Hey, you can wake me up at 4 a.m. to eat" (g2, bcn8, ref1)—the absence of designated spaces for prayer and the challenges in accessing cultural practices can lead to feelings of alienation. One educator noted, "During Ramadan, we

set up a room for night prayer, which was very successful" (g2, bcn12, ref1). However, this support seems limited to specific times rather than being a consistently accessible practice.

The experiences of these young people, as expressed in the interviews, reveal a strong need to be heard and to have their experiences validated. The perception that the system does not fully address their emotional, spiritual, and legal needs underscores the urgency of reforming a system that, at its core, should serve as a refuge for the most vulnerable. A reflection of this disconnect is seen in the doubts expressed by the children despite the efforts already mentioned by the educators: "At first, they were doubtful about the food. The meat purchased is Halal, and we had to request certificates from the meat suppliers and display them" (g2, bcn6, ref2).

3. Discussion and Conclusions

The growing pluralism in Spanish society, especially in cities like Barcelona and Melilla, presents challenges for interfaith dialogue, particularly with unaccompanied migrant youth. Addressing this reality requires a critical approach that counters stigmatizing labels and fosters spaces for interfaith dialogue, enabling young people to express and explore their identities in an inclusive environment (Modood 2021).

The analysis of the interviews highlights the complex realities young migrants face in Barcelona and Melilla, uncovering their socio-educational needs, future aspirations, and areas for improvement within the centers, resources, and organizations involved in the child protection system. The testimonies reveal a deep vulnerability to racism and structural discrimination, often exacerbated by superficial inclusion policies that fail to address the root causes of these inequalities. These findings challenge certain intergroup contact hypotheses (Kanas et al. 2015) as prejudiced attitudes toward unaccompanied migrant minors persist. As Phalet et al. (2018) pointed out, perceived discrimination and Islamophobia fuel identity conflict in Muslim youth, whereas more harmonious intercultural relations enable compatible and adaptive pathways of religious identity. This is in line with the study by Alemany-Arrebola et al. (2024), which observes heightened prejudice among youth in Melilla—a region where unaccompanied foreign minors are a prominent part of the educational and social landscape. Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) note that adolescence is a key period of socialization, especially with friends who share similar beliefs and attitudes. When there is limited understanding of "the other", subtle prejudices can emerge, often manifesting as feelings of discomfort toward unfamiliar peers. In this context, educational interventions that promote mutual understanding, intercultural exchange, and interfaith dialogue are essential to overcome these challenges.

Another conclusion drawn from the results is the remarkable resilience and strength demonstrated by these young people, aligning with previous studies (Abderrahman et al. 2022), particularly in Melilla, which is often the first reception point in the migration journeys of many unaccompanied youth (Vilà et al. 2023). Additionally, professionals who work closely with these young people show significant sensitivity and a willingness to create positive change (Vilà et al. 2024). Regarding manifestations of racism, staff at initial reception centers highlight two key elements: the educational support offered to help youth address experiences of rejection and the formation of anti-racist groups within the community to show solidarity with them. They also emphasize the need for broader social awareness campaigns to reduce these frequent instances of racism. Young migrants, in their search for identity, not only contend with negative stereotypes, but also actively seek to affirm themselves as individuals with legitimate rights and aspirations. This aligns with other studies, such as Abderrahman et al. (2022), which also emphasize the agency of these youth in overcoming adversity. Professionals face challenges in providing effective support, often feeling constrained by an inflexible system that limits their capacity for action.

It appears that meaningful change depends more on individual goodwill and personal commitment than on a comprehensive systemic review that addresses the complex needs of young migrants. This situation emphasizes the need for structural transformation to empower professionals to work more effectively and holistically for the benefit of these young people.

Finally, we conclude this study by emphasizing the importance of socio-educational action in addressing the challenges faced by young migrants. As Barba del Horno (2021) suggests, promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue can serve as tools to challenge the stigmatizing labels often imposed on young migrants. By sharing their narratives and experiences, these youth can rebuild their sense of identity and gain a richer, more nuanced understanding of their place in society. This approach is vital not only for fostering positive identities among migrant youth, but also for creating a collective societal responsibility to build more inclusive and supportive environments that promote their holistic development. This conclusion aligns with studies by Andreu-Mediero and Ouhamid-Zahri (2021), who argue that socio-educational intervention is key to fostering positive attitudes toward interculturality and religious diversity (Paluck and Shepherd 2012). However, building intercultural sensitivity and promoting interreligious dialogue must occur at all educational stages and levels, in both formal and informal settings, to cultivate attitudes of tolerance and solidarity across all cultural groups. As Sabariego et al. (2018) noted, this leads to personal and cultural enrichment. It is essential that this dialogue moves beyond mere formality and is rooted in a genuine recognition of diversity, coupled with a commitment to addressing existing inequities. For intercultural and interfaith dialogue to be truly effective, it must recognize and address the intersections between young people's diverse cultural, religious, and social identities. This requires a holistic approach that not only respects the uniqueness of their experiences, but also invites critical reflection on how these identities intersect within an increasingly pluralistic society. This diversity is also concerned with non-religious identities and their potential relevance for childhood and youth studies, as Hemming (2017) highlighted. Educators and professionals working with these youth must be equipped with the tools to create and sustain more inclusive environments.

However, current policies often overlook young people's lived experiences. Improving these policies requires a concerted and multifaceted effort that respects and values the complexity of their identities. It also entails a collective commitment to challenging negative stereotypes and actively working toward creating a social environment that promotes inclusion and recognition. Awareness-raising and educational initiatives focused on cultural and religious diversity are essential for combating racism and discrimination. These initiatives must be integrated into the policies and practices related to the care of migrant children.

4. Materials and Method

This article aims to explore how social dynamics and representations influence identity construction among children who migrate "alone" in two Spanish contexts, examining the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering more inclusive identity narratives.

This study employed a qualitative approach, utilizing semi-structured interviews and focus groups with young migrants and their educators in two key locations, Melilla and Barcelona, chosen for their distinct yet interconnected roles of care in the migratory process. Although the frameworks governing migration management and child protection differ (see Rinaldi 2019), together, they provide a comprehensive view of the challenges within Spain's child protection system. The sampling was purposive and representative. Specifically, 14 interviews were conducted with educators in Barcelona, and 7 were conducted in Melilla. Additionally, nine interviews and two focus groups were held with 20 minors in

Melilla (1 in a center for minors and the other with youths in street settings). In Barcelona, seven focus groups were conducted with 42 young people; five in DGAIA (Dirección General de Atención a la Infancia y la Adolescencia) centers and two with young people outside the DGAIA system.

Specific interview scripts were created for both educators and unaccompanied migrant youth. The dimensions addressed in this article pertain to the role of interfaith dialogue in promoting more inclusive identity narratives for unaccompanied migrant youth. These instruments were designed to capture participants' lived experiences, allowing the exploration of their perceptions of the community and the institutional dynamics they encounter in daily life. Additionally, the focus groups encouraged open dialogue among participants, facilitating the identification of common themes and differences within their experiences.

The interviews and focus groups were analyzed through transcription and categorization based on predetermined dimensions and categories. A thematic approach was applied to identify patterns that illustrate how social contexts and interreligious interactions influence identity construction, enabling an assessment of the role of interreligious dialogue in fostering more inclusive narratives. Data analysis was conducted using QSR NVivo v.12 qualitative analysis software.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, R.V.B., A.S.-M., M.F.N. and F.R.G.; methodology, R.V.B. and A.S.-M.; software, A.S.-M.; validation, R.V.B., A.S.-M., M.F.N. and F.R.G.; formal analysis, R.V.B., A.S.-M., M.F.N. and F.R.G.; investigation, R.V.B., A.S.-M., M.F.N. and F.R.G.; writing—review and editing, R.V.B., A.S.-M., M.F.N. and F.R.G.; project administration and funding acquisition, R.V.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities under Grant RTI2018-095259-B-I00.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted following the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the bioethics commission of the University of Barcelona [IRB00003099].

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and analyzed during the current study are not publicly available due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter and to protect the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

References

Abderrahman, Jhandy Mohamed, Francisca Ruiz, and Ruth Vilà. 2022. Resilience among Unaccompanied Foreign Minors. *Revista de Cercetare și Intervenție Socială* 79: 70–85. [CrossRef]

Alemany-Arrebola, Inmaculada, Miguel Ángel Gallardo-Vigil, María del Mar Ortiz-Gómez, and Ruth Vilà-Baños. 2024. Intercultural and Interreligious Dialogue Competences in Adolescents in Barcelona and Melilla (Spain). *Religions* 15: 211. [CrossRef]

Andrade, María Alejandra. 2017. The Role of Spirituality in Building Up the Resilience of Migrant Children in Central America: Bridging the Gap Between Needs and Responses. *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* 22: 84–101. [CrossRef]

Andreu-Mediero, Beatriz, and Imane Ouhamid-Zahri. 2021. "Ellos" o "nosotros"? Prejuicios y Estereotipos sobre los Musulmanes en el Alumnado Preadolescente. *Revista de Investigación en Didáctica de las Ciencias Sociales* 9: 152–70. [CrossRef]

Barba del Horno, Mikel. 2021. Los Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados como Problema: Sistema de Intervención y Construcción Social de una Alteridad Extrema. *Aposta. Revista de Ciencias Sociales* 41: 47–66. Available online: http://apostadigital.com/revistav3/hemeroteca/mikelbarba2.pdf (accessed on 18 July 2024).

Berganza, Isabel. 2003. Los Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados en Bizkaia. Situación Actual y Propuestas de Mejora. Unpublished thesis, Universidad de Deusto, Bilbo, Spain.

Bhabha, Homi K. 1994. *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Burchianti, Flora, and Ricard Zapata-Barrero. 2014. Is Catalonia Immune to Racism? An Analysis of Intolerant Political Discourses of Mainstream Party Representatives (2010–2011). *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 12: 401–17. [CrossRef]

Cabezas, Marta. 2022. ¿Silenciar al Feminismo? El Género y el Auge de la Extrema Derecha Nacionalista en España. *Signs: Revista de Mujeres en la Cultura y la Sociedad* 47: 319–45. [CrossRef]

Capdevila, Manel, and Marta Ferrer. 2003. Los Menores Extranjeros Indocumentados No Acompañados (MEINA). *Generalitat de Catalunya*. Available online: https://revistas.comillas.edu/index.php/revistamigraciones/article/view/4240 (accessed on 18 July 2024).

Erikson, Erik H. 1968. *Identity, Youth, and Crisis*. New York: Norton.

Giménez, Carlos, and Liliana Suárez. 2000. *Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados*. Madrid: Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales.

Hall, Stuart. 2003. ¿Quién necesita "identidad"? In *Cuestiones de Identidad Cultural*. Edited by Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, pp. 13–39.

Hemming, Peter J. 2017. Childhood, youth and non-religion: Towards a social research agenda. *Social Compass* 64: 113–29. [CrossRef]

Howarth, Caroline. 2002. Identity in Whose Eyes? The Role of Representations in Identity Construction. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 32: 145–62. [CrossRef]

Iglesias, José Luis. 2013. Desarrollo del Adolescente: Aspectos Físicos, Psicológicos y Sociales. *Pediatría Integral* 17: 88–93.

Kanas, Agnieszka, Peer Scheepers, and Carl Sterkens. 2015. Interreligious Contact, Perceived Group Threat, and Perceived Discrimination: Predicting Negative Attitudes among Religious Minorities and Majorities in Indonesia. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 78: 102–26. [CrossRef]

Lopez-Reillo, Paloma. 2011. *Jóvenes de África Reinventando Su Vida. Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados Salvando Fronteras*. Cabildo de Tenerife, Área de Empleo, Desarrollo Económico, Comercio y Acción Exterior.

Martínez-Ariño, Julia, Mar Griera, Gloria García-Romeral, and María Forteza. 2011. Inmigración, Diversidad Religiosa y Centros de Culto en la Ciudad de Barcelona. *Migraciones* 30: 101–33. Available online: https://revistas.comillas.edu/index.php/revistamigraciones/article/view/81 (accessed on 26 July 2024).

Meissner, Fran, and Steven Vertovec. 2014. Comparing Super-Diversity. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38: 541–55. [CrossRef]

Modood, Tariq. 2021. The Multiculturalist Challenge: A Rejoinder. *Patterns of Prejudice* 55: 141–46. [CrossRef]

Paluck, Elizabeth L., and Hana Shepherd. 2012. The Salience of Social Referents: A Field Experiment on Collective Norms and Harassment Behavior in a School Social Network. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 103: 899–915. [CrossRef]

Phalet, Karen, Fenella Fleischmann, and Jessie Hillekens. 2018. Religious identity and acculturation of immigrant minority youth: Toward a contextual and developmental approach. *European Psychologist* 23: 32–43. [CrossRef]

Quiroga, Violeta, Ariadna Alonso, and Montserrat Sòria. 2009. *Sueños de Bolsillo: Menores Migrantes No Acompañados en el País Vasco*. Vitoria: Gobierno Vasco.

Rinaldi, Patricia. 2019. Unaccompanied Migrant Minors at the Frontier of Human Rights. The Spanish Case. *International Journal of Children Rights* 27: 796–820. [CrossRef]

Rivas-Drake, Deborah, Eleanor K. Seaton, Carol Markstrom, Stephen Quintana, Moin Syed, Richard M. Lee, Seth J. Schwartz, Adriana J. Umaña-Taylor, Sabine French, and Tiffany Yip. 2014. Ethnic and Racial Identity in Adolescence: Implications for Psychosocial, Academic, and Health Outcomes. *Child Development* 85: 40–57. [CrossRef]

Sabariego, Marta, Ruth Vilà, and Montserrat Freixa. 2018. El Diálogo Interreligioso en el Espacio Público: Retos para los Agentes Socioeducativos en Cataluña. *Pedagogía Social. Revista Interuniversitaria* 32: 155–161. [CrossRef]

Save the Children. 2003. *Menores No Acompañados. Informe sobre la Situación de los Menores No Acompañados en España*. Madrid: Save the Children.

Suárez-Orozco, Marcelo, ed. 2019. *Humanitarism and Mass Migration: Confronting the World Crisis*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tahull, Joan. 2016. La Compleja Transición de los Adolescentes hacia la Vida Adulta. *Revista de Antropología Experimental* 16: 27–44. [CrossRef]

Troller, Susan. 2007. Unwelcome Responsibilities: Spain's Failure to Protect the Rights of Unaccompanied Migrant Children in the Canary Islands. *Human Rights Watch* 19. Available online: https://www.hrw.org/reports/spain0707webwcover.pdf (accessed on 24 July 2024).

UNICEF. 2021. Niños Migrantes No Acompañados. August 22. Available online: https://www.unicef.es/ninos-migrantes-no-acompanados (accessed on 24 July 2024).

UNICEF and CGAE. 2009. *Ni Ilegales Ni Invisibles: Realidad Jurídica y Social de los Menores Extranjeros en España. Informe 2009*. Barcelona: Etnia Comunicación.

Vilà, Ruth, Angelina Sánchez-Martí, Montserrat Freixa, and Marta Venceslao. 2024. Protection of Unaccompanied Child and Adolescent Migrants in Catalonia: Inhabited Places, Occupied Places or Non-Places? *Journal of Social Work* 24: 303–321. [CrossRef]

Vilà, Ruth, Marta Simó, Melissa Schmidlin, and Omaira Beltrán. 2023. El Periplo de los Menores y Jóvenes que Migran Solos: Procesos Migratorios e Itinerarios Institucionales. *Revista de Investigación Educativa* 41: 593–608. [CrossRef]

Vilà, Ruth, Montserrat Freixa, and Assumpta Aneas. 2020a. Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue in Education. *Interdisciplinary Journal for Religion and Transformation in Contemporary Society* 6: 255–73. [CrossRef]

Vilà, Ruth, Montserrat Freixa, Angelina Sánchez, and Maribel Mateo. 2021. Child and Adolescent Care Services: Addressing the Vulnerability of Unaccompanied Minors in Barcelona. In *Handbook of Research on Promoting Social Justice for Immigrants and Refugees Through Active Citizenship and Intercultural Education*. Edited by Isabel María Gómez. Hershey: IGI Global, pp. 16–36. [CrossRef]

Vilà, Ruth, Montserrat Freixa, Angelina Sánchez, Inés Massot, and Francisca Ruiz. 2020b. Los Mal Llamados "Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados" (MENA) en Barcelona Desde la Visión de las y los Educadores. In *La Convivencia Escolar: Un Acercamiento Multidisciplinar a las Nuevas Necesidades*. Edited by Dykinson. pp. 107–18. Available online: https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/libro?codigo=784534 (accessed on 18 July 2024).