

Young Agents of Change: Promoting Intercultural and Inclusive Education for Migrant Families through the AFEX Project

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Young agents of change are a key element in the success of the AFEX project. Their participation as facilitators, student volunteers and internship university students has allowed the creation of a multilingual, multilevel and intergenerational environment, thereby contributing to the intercultural and inclusive education of migrant families. In addition, the participation of young people has had a formative and personal development value that has made them committed citizens capable of transforming their environment. In a context of growing need for intercultural education, the participation of young people in projects like AFEX is an inspiring example of how youths can be agents of change and drivers of social transformation.

“AFEX, Aprenem: Famílies en Xarxa” [We Learn: Networking Families] is an intercultural and inclusive education project of Casa Asia in collaboration with the Federació de associacions de famílies de alumnado de secundària (Federation of Associations of Families of Secondary School Students, FA-PAES). It has the support of the Secretariat for Equality, Migration and Citizenship of the Government of Catalonia, the Barcelona Interculturality Plan of Barcelona City Council, and the Grup de Recerca en Ensenyament i Interacció Plurilingües (Multilingual

Teaching and Interaction Research Group, GREIP) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona.

Methodology

AFEX uses a methodology of Learning and Community Service focused on active participation of youths as agents of change in the community, promoting integration of people of migrant origin who have made Catalonia their new home, as well as familiarising them with

the Catalan education system. Young people teach Spanish, Catalan and basic computing in the families' native language, in a context in which dialogue and positive intercultural and intergenerational interaction are basic tools to strengthen learning and social cohesion.

In order to make this possible, AFEX has four fundamental pillars: a) adults of migrant origin, relatives of the students of the school where the project is carried out, who want to learn Spanish, Catalan or basic computing; b) young facilitators who, in addition to Spanish and Catalan, speak the native language or languages of the families; c) multilingual secondary or primary students who participate by volunteering; and d) and internship university students.

In its early days, around 2015, and given that it was created in Casa Asia, AFEX was aimed at adults of exclusively Asian origin, but, thanks to the attainment of the Francesc Candel Award (2018),¹ the collaboration of FAPAES and some Catalan town councils, it has been possible to extend the project to new schools throughout Catalonia to be accessible to all people, regardless of their gender and place of origin. Today, AFEX has adult students from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, China, Ghana, Mali, Ivory Coast, Morocco, Bolivia, Peru, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, Venezuela, Romania and Ukraine, who have a great deal of initiative and motivation to learn Spanish, Catalan and/or basic computing.

99% of adult students are women, mostly mothers, aunts and neighbours of the students in the school. This reveals an important gender issue. In migration contexts, men normally find it easier to learn the languages of the destination country due to their roles in the public sphere and work outside the home, while women have associated unpaid reproductive and care roles reserved for the private sphere, which contributes

to further limiting their chances of socialisation, and of getting a salaried job. These women suffer from greater social exclusion,² rarely leave their neighbourhood, have very limited social relations and find it even more difficult to learn and use local languages. Faced with this need, the dynamics created in the AFEX project, as well as the struggle and effort of the women themselves and the commitment of young people, help avoid migrant women's social exclusion.

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The AFEX facilitators,³ who lead each of the groups, are young university students who have experienced the migratory process first-hand and have had to learn the languages of Catalonia while pursuing their studies. Most learned Catalan through the welcome classes and Spanish in school classes and during their socialisation. Overcoming language barriers, stigmatisation and prejudice, they managed to enter university or get into vocational training, and they also grew up as responsible and socially committed people. AFEX recognises them as positive benchmarks of educational success, since thanks to their perseverance and effort they achieved higher education and ascended the social ladder with respect to the positions held by their parents. These young people, some of whom started out as volunteers and are now facilitators, are true drivers of social transformation in their groups and encourage other adolescents and youths to do the same.

The facilitators are in charge of disseminating the project through catch-up classes, meetings with the management and peda-

1. <https://bitly.co/Ju2c>

2. I. Llor, Aprenem. Families en xarxa (AFEX), 2018, <https://bitly.co/Ju2d>

3. Ibid.

gological coordination teams, and letters and posters translated into the native languages of the families of the school, with the aim of attracting volunteer students and encouraging adult relatives to learn Spanish, Catalan and/or basic computing. Once the groups are set up, their functions are to coordinate the monitoring of learning, create language pairs between adult students and volunteer students, prepare material and didactic sequences in a personalised manner according to the levels and degree of achievement of the contents, train and guide the volunteers so that they can perform their role, and create a safe and welcoming space for these families, who often face discrimination and exclusion in their new community. The facilitators also receive monthly training sessions about didactics of multilingual and inclusive education led by the CULT⁴ project of the GREIP research group at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB).

AFEX volunteers, made up of children and adolescents from the school, teach Spanish, Catalan or basic computing to adult students, who are their relatives or neighbours, through language pairs. Each volunteer adapts to the needs and learning pace of his or her adult student, making it possible to teach different levels simultaneously in the same classroom: literacy, and basic, elementary, intermediate and advanced levels, both oral and written. In addition, the richness and linguistic diversity of the volunteers is so high that it allows them to communicate with adult students in their native language, thus enabling multilingual, multilevel and intergenerational learning.

Volunteer students empower adult students, helping them gain autonomy and self-esteem and freeing their children from the task of

translating on visits to the town council, the doctor or school meetings. At the same time, volunteers become aware of the learning difficulties of adult migrants, learn to teach taking into account multiple levels of intelligence and different learning styles, and develop values such as empathy, solidarity, patience, responsibility, commitment, determination and perseverance.

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The participation of AFEX as object of study of the CULT⁵ research project has meant, among other things, having internship students from Social Education and Pedagogy at the UAB, who support the facilitators and volunteers in the groups, providing valuable knowledge of didactics and putting into practice the skills acquired in their degrees. At the same time, they have an immersion experience in diversity, interculturality and multilingualism through contact with people of diverse cultural origins. In addition, thanks to GREIP, students from the UAB Primary Education Degree have also become involved and are doing their final degree projects on how to facilitate the language learning of illiterate migrant women.

How the Classes Work

The AFEX project sessions take place two days a week for an hour and a half. In most schools they are held in the afternoon, coinciding with the extracurricular activities, but in others they take place during teaching hours. Teaching

4. Constructing a collaborative understanding of learning and teaching for the 21st century.

5. <https://bitly.co/Ju2i>

takes place in the first hour. It usually begins with a game that involves and activates all the participants; this is followed by work in language pairs between adult students and volunteer students through didactic sequences that enable skills applicable to reality and daily life to be developed (introducing yourself, shopping in the market, going to the doctor, dealing with the town council, enrolling your children, renting a flat), with the support of internship university students and the leadership of the facilitators.

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The last half hour is reserved for volunteer training. Subjects such as multiple intelligences, gender relations and identity and cultural diversity are gradually dealt with. In addition, each volunteer presents the progress of their adult student and then there is a joint reflection on the aspects to improve, and the contents of the next class are planned. This is also an opportunity for volunteers to talk about their emotions, experiences, proposals and any possible conflicts that may have surfaced.

Periodically, the entire hour and a half is used to develop cross-cutting activities, in which facilitators, adult students, volunteer students, internship university students and external agents committed to education participate, with the aim of bringing the working of the Catalan education system closer to migrated families. Then, the management and pedagogical coordination team and representatives of the School's Students' Families Association (AFA) are invited to one of the AFEX sessions, so that they find out about the efforts and progress of adult students and young promoters of change (facilitators, student volunteers, and internship

university students). The aim of this meeting, on the one hand, is to integrate adult students in the activities of the AFA and, on the other, to make migrant families more familiar to the rest of the educational community, to help breakdown prejudices and bring about cultural rapprochement.

In addition, FAPAES offers training sessions for families on post-compulsory studies. These sessions are online, in Spanish or Catalan. The AFEX group participates from the classroom itself, connecting to the session, and the facilitators simultaneously translate into the native languages of the families (Urdu, Hindi, Darija, Chinese, etc.) so that the adult students learn about the different opportunities and options that their sons and daughters have to study once they finish compulsory education; and to encourage student volunteers to continue their studies. Moreover, the facilitators and internship students share their experience about what led them to choose their respective courses and how it is going now; and resolve any doubts or concerns of adult students and volunteer students, who will soon have to decide what to study. In this way, young women, through their position as positive role models, help prevent early school dropout of adolescents from migrant families.

Conclusion

Therefore, we may conclude that, by getting involved in projects that they are passionate about and that enable them to develop their skills and abilities, young people become agents of change who can transform their environment. The participation of young people in the AFEX project has been multidimensional. They have acted as facilitators, volunteers and internship university students, sharing their knowledge and experiences with migrant families through intercultural dialogue and mutual respect. In

this way, the youths have helped avoid the social exclusion of women and mothers, giving them the tools and skills necessary to interact with the education system and participate in

the community, to prevent early school dropout of adolescents from migrant families, and to create a more diverse, inclusive and harmonious society.



Euro-Mediterranean youths in a meeting at the UE.