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Empowering Migrant Youth through Participatory Approach in Social Work

Abstract

Young immigrants have the greatest risk of exclusion in many European countries, due to educational inequalities, both in outcomes and opportunities, and to socio-economic family conditions.
The paper proposes a reflection on two projects involving immigrant minors in Italy. The first is a participatory research project on child labour/work conducted with a group of working immigrant teenagers; the second is a tutoring project conducted with immigrant university students to support foreign students at risk of failure. Through participatory approaches, the two experiences read differently the child work and the school failure of the children of immigrants, highlighting the different perspectives with which the two issues can be analyzed and addressed. It shows the potential of participatory methods in offering different perspectives and in empowering young people, as well as the possible implications for social work. The results provide useful insights for working with immigrant subjects in other areas as well.

Introduction

Young immigrants have the highest risk of exclusion in many European countries. Various studies and international surveys document the existence of educational inequalities between immigrants and natives, in terms of both outcomes and opportunities, and highlight the risks of failure and dropout (OECD, 2014). The cultural and economic capital of families

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affects educational paths, but can also affect other dimensions of daily life, such as the contrast between school and work experience at a young age, for example, and different cultural patterns and the family's socio-economic conditions affect this aspect as well. In many cases the disadvantage of immigrant children leads to a higher risk of exclusion from conventional training, although these children often don't have a negative view of their work.

In this respect, the paper offers a reflection on two projects involving immigrant minors in Italy. Through participatory approaches, the two experiences read differently regarding the child labour/work and the school failure of the children of immigrants, focussing on their lives and the direct involvement of the adolescents themselves. The first is a participatory research project on child labour/work conducted with a group of working immigrant teenagers; the second is a tutoring project conducted with immigrant university students to support foreign students at risk of failure. Both projects highlight the different perspectives from which the two issues can be analyzed and addressed, and show the potential of participatory methods in offering different points of view.

This paper presents the theoretical framework of the two projects, focussing on the challenges for migrant youths and working migrant children, and provides a synthesis of the features of participatory approaches. Subsequently, relying on the results of the two projects conducted in Italy, it examines the experiences of peer researchers and migrant tutors in order to understand their perspectives and contributions. The conclusions highlight the effects of participatory approaches on personal experiences as well as the possible implications for Social Work.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical references that guided the two projects can be traced back to three thematic areas: scholastic failure, child labour, and participatory approaches. Obviously an in-depth examination of each topic would require analysis of the vast literature, which goes beyond the objectives of this contribution. Therefore only some of references used will be referred to below.

A now well-established fact emerging from the studies is the persistence of inequalities in the school performances and levels of education achieved by migrant children compared to their native peers. This holds true in many European countries, despite differences between the national legislations, as confirmed by Pisa (2012) findings, which assessed the competences of 15-year-olds in reading, mathematics and science in 65 countries and

economies (OECD, 2014). These educational inequalities are rooted in both their migrant background and other factors, such as social status, parental education, economic capital, aspirations, and different stratification of secondary school systems (Heath, Brinbaum, 2007, 2014; Griga, 2013).

With regards to Italy, students of immigrant origins obtain lower outcomes, have more irregular paths and lower rates in continuing their studies beyond compulsory education (Colombo, Santagati, 2014; Santagati, 2015; Barabanti, 2015; Bertozzi, 2016). Difficulties are greater when it comes to the transition between different school levels, especially in the first years of secondary education, and for students born abroad and reunited with their families in adolescence.

School failure is therefore a problem and aggravates situations of exclusion, making integration paths more difficult. Data on early school leavers also show the disadvantage of foreigners: in 2013 early school leavers accounted for 14.8% of natives and for 34.4% of foreign citizens (Santagati, 2015).

Nevertheless, the outcomes are not predetermined by the initial disadvantage and the agency of the subject can lead to unexpected results. Some international studies show that while the migrant experience (direct or indirect) has negative primary effects on learning outcomes (due, for example, to language difficulties, low level of parental support, mobility, and so on), educational choices can be positively influenced by migrant origins, and students of migrant origins can eventually decide to go on to tertiary education despite worse secondary school performances (Griga, 2014; Rothon, 2007; Kristen, Granato, 2007; Griga, Hadjar, 2014; Jackson et al., 2012). Choices are of course also influenced by the resources available and the support received.

The recent socio-economic crisis has not been conducive to reducing these differences in school participation and has highlighted the need for more effective work socialization (Lodigiani, Santagati, 2016). The intertwining of school and work is not new, but there still seem to be many challenges. Youth unemployment has reached record levels in recent years and at the same time there is a clear need for rapid integration into the labour market. Equally, the incidence of young people: *Not in Education, Employment or Training* (NEETs) is increasing and highlights a generalized crisis among the new generations, which are neither in training nor in work.

School-work alternation is a highly topical issue, yet at the same time there has been a drastic decrease in interest in child labour by public opinion and scholars alike. Until the early 2000s, scholars and research institutes in Italy investigated the conditions of working children, including in relation to school attendance (Teselli, Paone, 2000; Tagliaventi, 1999, 2004; Italian National Institute of Statistics, 2002). Some researches tried to analyse in detail the motivations and the meanings of the working experiences,

with a particular focus on immigrant pre-adolescents (Giovannini, Queirolo Palmas, 2002; Bertozzi, 2004).

The results show the specificity of migrant minors as well as their similarities with Italian minors. For example, for both Italians and immigrants the economic variable affects the likelihood of continuing education, as well as the parents' educational level. However, with migrant children there are also other factors at play. The meaning attributed to school and work can depend on the "migratory project" of the individual and the family. There may be cultural variables at work, as in some cultures of origin the work of children is seen as a legitimate contribution to family support (Bertozzi, 2004; Teselli, 2007). Socio-relational capital is also important: those who are more anchored to the ethnic communities can receive support and be included in co-ethnic networks of work activities, even if this type of support can sometimes produce a bonding capital with negative effects (Ravecca, 2009).

These studies have been useful in highlighting disadvantaged situations and the often negative impact of ethnic factors. Much of this research, however, was conducted within educational institutions and the investigations often did not reach the most marginal immigrants; in other cases, they approached the issues from the point of view of researchers, and potentially failed to grasp 'other' possible meanings for the subjects involved.

An alternative or complementary perspective can be offered by participatory approaches, which are particularly widespread in the field of Social Work. Unlike research conducted through conventional approaches, participatory research involves a bi-directional approach, in which there is a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the subject of the research. The professional therefore has a listening attitude and includes in the research process those who live, or have lived, the situations under investigation; the subjects involved in the research share with the professional the knowledge of the phenomenon being investigated thanks to their direct experiences of life (Narayan, 1996). The specificity is the fact that the research is carried out with the people who constitute the research target and not on them (Cornwall, Jewkes, 1995; Fleming, 2010; Littlechild et al., 2015). So, the research process "involves those being researched in the decision-making and conduct of the research, including project planning, research design, data collection and analysis, and/or the distribution and application of research findings" (Bourke, 2009: 458).

However, there is no single definition of participatory research and there may be different variations of it. Participation can take place in different forms and degrees, but the goal remains to include those directly involved and to produce shared knowledge between academics and others, which brings new awareness to all those involved. "A central goal of the process is to

involve people as active creators of information and knowledge" (Narayan, 1996: 17). This production of knowledge constitutes in itself a possibility for personal and social change.

The outcomes of these participatory processes are therefore twofold: on the one hand, they foster knowledge of a given phenomenon, and, on the other, they have direct repercussions on the lives of the participants and can create the conditions for change in the realities experienced. This methodological perspective has assumed progressive importance also in work with minors, as shown by the numerous international studies carried out "with" or "by" children instead of "on" children (Brownlie et al., 2006; Wilkinson, 2000; Laws, Mann, 2004; Liebel, 2008; Kellett, 2005).

Two participatory projects: aims and methodologies

Ethnic minorities are often included in the category of vulnerable individuals, and they are often prevented from actively participating in research due to a variety of reasons (Steel, 2001; Panciroli, 2017). The same holds true for working children and adolescents who, especially in some cases, are at risk of social exclusion. The difficulties and challenges posed by their active involvement often discourage the use of participatory approaches, despite their great potential, since they offer different points of view and can have significant repercussions on the subjects involved and in the actions to be promoted.

The two projects presented below involved immigrant minors through participatory approaches. These are different projects, conducted in different cities (Rome and Reggio Emilia) and in different periods. However, we believe it is useful to review them together because they deal with issues that are often read in a specular way (child labour and scholastic difficulties), and because they are based on the direct involvement of migrant subjects in order to better understand the problems and adopt suitable actions with the subjects themselves rather than just for them.

The first is a participatory research project on migrant working adolescents conducted in Rome in 2007–2008. The second is a tutoring project run by university students with immigrant origins in 2014–2016 in Reggio Emilia to combat school failure among secondary immigrant students.

Both projects were aimed at improving the living conditions of disadvantaged people: research on child labour sought to understand the conditions in which migrant children work, starting from their points of view, and to improve educational policies; the Tutor project offered support to some students facing difficulties in order to tackle school failure and dropout.

A further goal was also to activate young people of immigrant origins, getting them directly involved in generating processes of understanding and change.

For this reason, the proposed reflections will focus on the activation processes and on the points of view of peer researchers and tutors of migrant students. Through their experiences we can see the contribution made by participatory methodologies. The projects will be analyzed separately, to preserve their specificity, but will lead to common concluding reflections on the implications of these methodologies for Social Work with migrants at risk of exclusion.

Participatory research on/with working migrant adolescents

The first project is a participatory research project conducted in Rome and promoted by Save the Children Italy (Bertozzi, 2010; Bertozzi, 2007). The aim of this peer research project was to analyse the work of migrant youth and explore its meanings and characteristics. Working adolescents are usually associated with poverty and social exclusion and, in this case, the research project sought to analyse this topic from a different perspective, enabling some migrant minors to take an active role in analysing the situation and proposing solutions.

The research team involved 12 immigrant adolescents, aged 15 to 18, with some working experiences, and from different countries of origins. These peer researchers were considered part of the research team, so that investigators shared with the participants their age, present and past experiences, life contexts and cultural heritage. The unique feature of this two-year research project was the pivotal role played by the young people themselves, which informed the entire research process and contributed to its definition, revision and ongoing re-adjustment. Peer researchers collaborated in defining research tools, they collected data, and interpreted and disseminated results (Bertozzi, 2010). In the second year, the research tools were expanded to include a micro-observatory connected with street-units, providing the opportunity to make contact with more working adolescents.

The research had two main goals: firstly to understand the characteristics of the migrant minors' jobs and the various forms of exploitation of child labour in Rome, and secondly to enable these youths to speak with their own voice, in order to understand their perspectives on the phenomenon and to promote their training and engagement as active participants, rather than treating them as passive research subjects. This also implied advocating for and with the young people involved in the project.

This process has highlighted the potential of participatory methodologies, where the involvement of peer researchers actually affected the analysis of the phenomenon and the methodologies used. First of all, the areas to be investigated were defined in conjunction with the young participants, starting from their perspective on child labour. This required the use of a wide and flexible category of work, to encompass all significant experiences and to reflect only later on the distinction between work activities, informal economy activities and crimes (such as theft). This process was important as it enabled the investigation of multiple experiences and understanding of the meanings attributed by minors to the activities carried out, with ongoing discussion and exchange.

The analyses have taken into account the influence of the different cultures of origin and of the migratory experiences. From the outset of the research, we tried to understand with the peer researchers the meaning of activities carried out in Italy, in the countries of origin or in transit countries, in order to compare.

> In Ecuador I helped my mother to sell things at the market ... I carried things from one place to another ... I did that every day after school ... for 6–7 years ... I liked doing this... but first you had to do your homework and eat... (Seller, Ecuadorian, 18)

> I've been in Italy for three years, I work in a pastry shop, I have to make croissants, put cream in them .... Six days, 8 hours, always working at night (from 8 p.m. until morning)... I've been doing this job for a year and a half almost, since I was 14 and a half ... my father found this job ... I work because I don't want to study ... I like this job ... Yes, they pay almost 1000 euros .. no contract .. I give all the money to my father, I keep more or less 100 a month for myself... (Confectioner, Indian, 16)

> I'm a hairdresser, I started working at the age of 14 ... I work seven days, the whole week, 10 hours .. I start at 8 till 12, then I start at one o'clock until eight o'clock ... the shop is open on Sundays too. I've been in Italy for two years, I started this job soon after I arrived in Italy ... I've always done this job, even in Bangladesh I did this job. I was also used to working in Bangladesh, there are no fixed times, payments are made every month ... when you want to open you open, when you want to close you close. Here the boss is my friend, from Bangladesh, in the shop there are two of us, the boss and myself. Money pays little, for me a little, 900 euros a month ... I pay rent, I buy clothes, so to eat, light .. many things at home, with the rest I send it home to Bangladesh... (Hairdresser, Bangladeshi, 18)

The research tools were designed with peer researchers: this fostered the use of simple language, also useful in the approach with peers, and helped to identify the most effective tools for understanding the various situations. Two professional researchers trained peer researchers in research methodologies to enable them to conduct the interviews. Over the course of the two-year project, the peer researchers interviewed 105 working migrant youth aged from 8 to 18, of different national origins and involved in 120 activities.

The findings provide a rich picture with many clues pointing to the existence of various problems, including a lack of knowledge of rights to

education, of workers' rights and of the rights to minimum working conditions in Italy; a widespread lack of awareness of what exploitation is, even in situations that present themselves as such; and a significant number of irregular situations such as the absence of a work contract or security and long working hours.

All the interviewees say they work to help their families in Italy or in their countries of origin, and the work appears to be connected to the possibility of improving their living conditions. Many minors do not have a negative view of their work experience, and the reasons they give for working are related to economic conditions, family situations and dissatisfaction with the school they attend. Thanks to the peer researchers, the approach to work activities was judgment-free, and this helped the whole research team not to consider the work itself as negative, but rather to see exploitation as the real problem. For exploitative situations, peer researchers discussed possible protective actions with the professional researchers.

The benefits of this methodology were also found in relation to the more confidential relationships established with peers in situations of social exclusion, in overcoming linguistic barriers and in engaging minors, who would have been difficult to reach by conventional researchers, in informal contexts. The peer approach also reduced the concerns of respondents to the contents of the survey. Obviously, this methodology required attention to ethical issues (Laws, Mann, 2004; Alderson, Morrow, 2004; Camacho, 2007), and thus, in each phase of the research, we tried to guarantee confidentiality, anonymity, informed consent and protection from risks for both peer researchers and participants.

The impact of this participatory methodology places the empowerment of peer researchers at the centre. Young people have gained a greater awareness of the conditions and protection measures provided for workers in Italy, starting from their peers' work experiences and rereading them together with expert legal advisers and professional researchers. They have developed a concept of rights by considering concrete situations close to their experiences. The research experience has therefore provided them with useful cognitive tools to approach the work, but also to understand the society in which they live.

The importance attributed to work and the possibility of earning money was considered in relation to ideas about the rights and conditions that must be guaranteed to all workers and, in particular, to minors. These themes were also important for advocacy actions, designed together with them. Peer researchers shared the knowledge they acquired in informal settings with friends.

Thanks to participatory research, this experience has enabled us to investigate the phenomenon of work by immigrant minors starting from the subjects involved, reducing the power imbalances that often exist in

conventional research and recognizing the skills and roles of responsibility of the minors themselves. The research encouraged changes in the lives of the individual participants, but also in the interpretations of the agency staff. By its very nature, the research also required constant attention to cultural specificities and to acculturation processes derived from migratory experiences.

Empathy and support: tutors with immigrant background

The second project is a tutoring project aimed at tackling the school failure of a group of immigrant students from secondary schools in Reggio Emilia (Northern Italy). The project *Tutor in lingua madre* (Mother-tongue tutors)[1] was managed by the Mondinsieme Intercultural Foundation and by the Albero della Vita Foundation and monitored by the University of Modena and Reggio Emilia in the years 2014–15 and 2015–16.

As many studies show, the scholastic failure of immigrant students is a persistent fact. The aim of this project was to counter it starting from the enhancement of the experience and the linguistic and cultural potential of some immigrant students who had already faced and overcome the difficulties of school integration.

20 young people with immigrant background, mostly university students, were selected as tutors. Secondary schools identified 80 students of immigrant origins with scholastic difficulties.[2] Each tutor helped 4 students, the majority of whom were born abroad, had arrived in Italy some years before, had parents with low and middle school qualifications and had already experienced various kinds of failures in their educational careers.

Unlike the first project examined earlier, this was not a research project but an action-oriented project, even though the participation of tutors with immigrant origins has led to important cognitive insights. The project methodology was based on the "parrainage" tutor-student relationship, which focuses on common experiences and linguistic-cultural resources, to activate proximity supports. The tutors gave the students scholastic support but also supported their motivation and willingness to commit themselves to a better future. University students met secondary students several times a week, helping them with their homework but also sharing with them the difficulties due to their migration background (such as linguistic and relational difficulties with parents and peers). Being of immigrant origin

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[1]   See the Mondinsieme website (accessed: 23.02.2018).
[2]   The project was carried out for two school years, with 40 students each year, although not all students participated on an ongoing basis and completed the project. Ten tutors per year were involved in the project.

certainly encouraged greater closeness and understanding of these difficulties, and being older allowed them to offer their experience in overcoming the initial obstacles. Moreover, the fact that they were university students acted as a positive example of success and investment in education.

The outcomes of the project can be read from the dual perspective of immigrant students and tutors. In line with the aims of the paper, we will focus on the implications of the participation of young people of immigrant origins as tutors. Indeed, the mother-tongue tutor was the key element of the project, initially born with the idea of enhancing language skills, then focusing more on the enhancement of the migratory background.

The tutors were selected on the basis of certain requirements (languages, motivation, countries of origin). Once the project group was set up, the tutors were involved in defining the methodologies, starting from their school experience and trying to identify with them the causes of failures and the support strategies. Once the tutors were combined with the students, weekly meetings began. The tutors also met regularly with each other and with a supervisor, for weekly monitoring of the project.

The tutors also worked with the families and the teachers from the schools, to encourage communication, which was otherwise non-existent for many of the students. The tutors also made an important contribution to the evaluation and re-design phase of the project.

The main motivation behind the tutors' involvement in the project was the desire to help those in difficulty. The tutors think they can use the sensitivity acquired through their experiences and their ability to read the family dynamics of known cultural contexts, and they believe in the usefulness of external aid.

The skills used by tutors are their academic knowledge, knowledge of the language and the closeness of their experiences. Their common migratory background in particular allowed them to share difficulties concerning relationships with parents and the experience of managing a dual cultural belonging. In many cases, the friendships born during the project strengthened the students' social capital.

> I think of how my family acted (...) the mother showed up at school but did not speak a word, she brought along her cousin who was a translator, but her mother's only concern was that her daughter did not miss school, not that her daughter was fine. My parents also had this concern, not because I lost school hours but because they were afraid I was doing something else (...) I was caught between two stools, I mean the two different cultures, so I can imagine how difficult it is (Tutor of Pakistani origins, female).

Looking at the needs of the students, the tutors perceived the following needs: to be listened to, trusted, to be helped in balancing the two cultures and to be supported in studying as the family members could not provide such help.

I noticed a great need to be motivated and to believe in one's abilities (Tutor of Moroccan origins, female)

I think students feel the need to be heard, to receive more attention and to recognize their commitment, for those who take it seriously (Tutor of Pakistani origins, female)

In my opinion, as a tutor I was able to grasp the need for both homework support and emotional support (Tutor of Albanian origin, female)

I realized that many of my students needed a hand with studying, especially in revising texts. Others needed someone to explain things to them with simpler and clearer concepts. Others needed someone to make them feel they were available to them, as someone to talk to, especially about family problems. And there were those who needed a little stimulus and appreciation to be able to give the best of themselves (tutor of Ghanaian origins, female)

Common national origin was also useful in the relationship with families, both from a language and a cultural point of view, although it was not something that could be taken for granted.

There is no doubt that the most important factor was knowledge of the language, immediately followed by cultural proximity. Playing at home is definitely more of a facilitating factor (Tutor of Moroccan origins, female)

At the end of the project, the tutors said they learned to be more responsible and more organized, that they improved their ability to work in a group and to express their opinions and that they learned to relate with institutional actors, such as schools and families. The tutors were able to review and reread their own path, their difficulties and the results obtained, with different eyes. Even the possibility of using one's linguistic-cultural resources or resources related to migratory background allowed them to reflect on the potential they may have.

We speak the same dialect. My linguistic resources, migratory background and family history are of great help in this case because our families are from the same country and we have grown up with the same way of thinking, so I will have no problem in understanding her (Tutor of Moroccan origins, female).

Speaking the same language helped to make them feel at ease because they speak little Italian (Tutor of Chinese origins, female).

The parents see that you are a successful immigrant tutor, this gives them more confidence (Tutor of Moroccan origins, male).

The students involved confirm the dual significance of the relationship with the tutor, which provided scholastic as well as emotional support. Looking at the educational success, only 65% of the students who completed the project succeeded. But school results, albeit important, were not the only objective pursued by the project. The students' comments point to the importance of relations and the empathy shown by the tutors.

It helps me a lot with the language and makes me understand what I didn't understand, Studying is easier, It was an opportunity of getting support in studying,

> I need a place where we can study together, I studied with my tutor and passed the law course and now I'm fine with the subject, I need help and to let teachers know that I'm doing the work.

> My meeting with Mariem was the most beautiful thing, because I also regarded her as a sister, and I told her everything, the problems I had and gave vent to, when you're down, they cheer you up, and they give you so much esteem and courage, and that's what I need, we celebrated my birthday together. My tutor was very nice and congratulated me. Then he was always a like friend to us as, so he is very good as a teacher, but also as a person, the best thing was the first approach, which revealed that he was a kind and friendly person.

The involvement of tutors with immigrant origins thus enabled the issue of school failure to be addressed not just as a problematic area in the school path, to be resolved by providing support during subject study, but also to understand it in the light of the obstacles encountered by the children of immigrants. The tutors offered students the experience and understanding of people who faced the same challenges. This made it possible to better understand some experiences, to value shared resources, but also to activate children of immigrants to bring about changes.

Even with respect to schools and services, the project promoted a different approach to students with immigrant origins and second-generation immigrant students, seeing them as resources that can be engaged and activated to meet the difficulties of newcomers.

Conclusion: what implications for social work?

The results provide useful insights for Social Work with migrants.

Both projects focused on enhancing the resources of young people with immigrant origins. The goal was to produce a different understanding of the investigated phenomena and a change that would begin from the life of the subjects and work its way through to the social structures. The logic "with them and not for them" has therefore offered different perspectives on situations of early work or school failures, providing a starting point from which to combat social exclusion.

The power imbalances that may exist when a single point of view is considered (that of the researcher, of the academic world or of the professionals involved) can be reduced if the migrant subjects are placed at the centre when investigating situations that concern them.

A shared migratory background fosters more confidential relations and reduces linguistic barriers; it allows a constructive dialogue between academic researchers and peers/tutors on the categories used, and integrates the technical-professional skills of the former with the experiential ones of the latter.

In this sense, both projects enabled them to learn from each other. The researchers/agency staff were able to read the realities of young immigrants from a different point of view; the peers/tutors involved developed new knowledge about the situations and contexts experienced by the migrant youths and were able to understand their experiences in a different way.

Flexibility was important in both projects: the paths were adapted over their respective two-year periods, based on the contributions of the peers/tutors thanks to an attitude of openness towards what participatory processes could bring.

Both experiences gave rise to a process of empowerment of the subjects involved. Both the peer researchers and the tutors with immigrant origins show that they strengthened their self-esteem, becoming more aware of their own potential and, in some cases, this favoured the development of agentic power, or the ability to bring about a wider change (for example, to improve the scholastic experiences of other students with immigrant origins).

The experiences were an opportunity to bring into play personal skills and abilities or to discover new ones. The subjects involved said they had used and acquired different knowledge, skills and attitudes. These include specific linguistic and cultural knowledge (knowledge), listening skills, mediation, observation, patience, problem solving, responsibility and ability to work in a group (skills), and openness, respect, proximity and empathy (attitudes). These outcomes are interesting and can open a reflection on intercultural competences (Deardoff, 2006) that these young people have managed to employ or develop thanks to participatory methodologies.

These results show the possibility of adopting a different perspective for working with people of immigrant origin, considering them not as passive actors or objects to be investigated, but as subjects to be involved and with whom to build different narratives. Participation in research processes or in the implementation of actions can generate different forms of knowledge and discourses that affect social representations and attitudes. These approaches could therefore have some potential benefits for other categories of immigrants too, such as refugees and unaccompanied minors, who today are particularly vulnerable and also at risk of not having a voice.

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