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Identity Options and School Experiences of Mixed-Parentage Youth in Spain: Between Invisibility and Racialization

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Abstract: This paper examines the schooling experiences related to identity and sense of belonging of mixed parentage (binational) children and youth in Catalonia, Spain. Despite the growing reality of multiracial and multiethnic children and youth in the country, their educational experiences remain an under-researched area, as they have generally been subsumed under the experiences of immigrant populations. Using a qualitative approach grounded in semi-structured in-depth interviews, this research explores mixed parentage students' diverse and unequal experiences, considering the influence of both in-school and out-of-school factors. The findings reveal pervasive origin-based stigma despite mixedness, with significant differences between students of mixed parentage whose immigrant parent's origin is socially and culturally valued, and who tend to be more economically affluent, and those whose immigrant parent's origin is racialized and who are therefore more stigmatized and discriminated. These results challenge prevailing optimistic narratives about the inclusivity of schools for mixed-parentage students and highlight the role of racialization in shaping their sense of belonging, academic engagement, and overall educational trajectories.
Keywords: Mixed parentage youth, school experiences, immigration, cultural identity, racialization.

This paper examines the primary and compulsory secondary school[2] experiences and identities of young people (some still students, some former ones) raised in binational or mixed families, with parents born in different countries, primarily a native Spanish parent and a foreign-born parent. More specifically, the study employs a descriptive and interpretative approach[3] to research how mixed-race youth navigate the educational and academic milieu in relation to their identities and sense of belonging.

Despite being an increasingly growing population in the country, there is no previous research in Spain on the school experiences, expectations, and trajectories of young people of mixed parentage. Not even the official Spanish statistical institutions in education collect data on the mixed ethnic background of the school-going population. Their analysis is limited to

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[2] The Spanish Education System is structured in the following official education stages: Non-compulsory Infant Education (Kindergarten from 0 to 3 years; Pre-school, integrated into primary schools, from 3 to 6 years); Compulsory Primary Education (6-12 years); Compulsory Secondary Education or ESO (12-16 years), Baccalaureate/"Bachillerato" (16-18 years), Vocational Training (Intermediate and Higher Level Training Cycles); and University.
[3] Given the absence of precedents in our context and the novelty of the contribution, our work is fundamentally descriptive-interpretive rather than analytical-theoretical.

nationality, a variable that has proven to be weak for representing the school population of foreign immigrant origin in all its complexity. Currently, there are only two statistical studies based on surveys, one for Catalonia[4] (Ballestín-González & López-Oller, 2018), and one -longitudinal- for the entire country of Spain (Rodríguez-García et al., 2021a), which collects some relevant information -albeit brief and limited- on the school trajectories of children of mixed couples. The Catalan Youth Survey, for example, found that more than half of the children from mixed couples had completed higher education studies in 2017 (51.3%), surpassing their peers with two Spanish parents (37.1%) and those with immigrant parents but born in Catalonia (42%). This percentage was only 15.8% for the children of endogamous immigrant families. Some other indicators, such as dropping out of Compulsory Secondary Education, also showed advantageous results for children of mixed families compared to peers of endogamous immigrant families (Ballestín-González & López-Oller, 2018).

However, these apparently optimistic numbers hide some darker issues concerning schooling experiences when we consider the internal heterogeneity of the group in terms of the ethnic-cultural origin of the immigrant parents. Therefore, our aim is to determine to what extent and in relation to which factors do the school experiences of mixed parentage individuals differ from those of their autochthonous and immigrant-origin peers. Moreover, our objective is to answer some key questions*:* (1) What specific school experiences do mixed parentage young people have? (2) Are there differences and inequalities within the group, both at the academic and at the relational levels? What is the role of racialization in these outcomes? (3) To what extent does the role played by peers and teachers contribute to shaping these differential experiences and identities?

We understand *racialization* as the ideological and discursive construction of race, which serves to legitimize social hierarchies (Miles, 1989). Race is not a biological reality but rather a socially and historically contingent construct to categorize and subordinate certain groups. Hall (1997) extends this idea, emphasizing that racialization operates through representation and discourse, shaping how people understand and enact racial identities. Racial categories are fluid and change depending on historical and cultural contexts. Scholarship on racialization in schools (Phoenix, 2002) highlights how institutional and social structures reinforce racial hierarchies, impacting students' experiences and educational outcomes.

Based on this general framework, we use multiracial and mixed race (Aspinall, 2009; Song, 2017), as well as multiethnic and mixed parentage/heritage, or even biracial (Baxley, 2008) and bicultural (Halpern, 2019; Tarn et al., 2024), as equivalent terms, recognizing the ambiguity of the race/ethnicity distinction (Jenkins, 1997; Wade, 2022). Although race is generally thought of as an externally imposed category based on constructed physical markers (mainly phenotype) and associated with colonialism, where non-white skin color is assigned an inferior status, and ethnicity is often defined as a chosen and self-constructed distinctiveness related to cultural descent or nation-building, the reality is that ethnicity can take on a primordialist dimension in the same way that race does (Jenkins, 1997; Ortiz, 2017). Populations that were not subject to colonial history or that were not considered "people of color" have also been racialized. For example, in Spain, Muslims, Jews, and Roma populations have historically been racialized as absolute Others, and their ethnocultural differences have been used essentially to justify their marginalization, exclusion, or even mass murder (Rodríguez-García, 2022).

[4] The *Enquesta a la Joventut de Catalunya* (Catalan Youth Survey) is launched by the Autonomous Government of Catalonia every five years and always includes a chapter on youth and immigration. The last survey (2017) was carried out on a sample of 3,423 individuals aged between 15 and 34. Children from mixed families in this population accounted for 4.6% of the total.

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The focus and questions that guided our research are rooted in and justified by previous relevant studies with implications for educational policy and practice. The main contributions (Joseph & Briscoe-Smith, 2021; Wardle & Cruz-Jansen, 2004; Winn Tutwiler, 2016) draw on research on identity development and emphasize that multiethnic and multiracial children face unique challenges compared to their single-race peers (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Brunsma, 2006; Williams, 2011). Furthermore, according to Root (2003) and Johnston & Nadal (2010), they may experience a variety of forms of harassment from monoracial groups, especially in the form of microaggressions (Nadal et al., 2011). Based on findings exploring how peer relationships and school climate (Ballestín-González, 2023) affect the experiences of mixed-heritage students (Boyle, 2022; Joseph & Briscoe-Smith, 2021; Winn Tutwiler, 2016), researchers note that policy recommendations should include the need for curriculum reform that goes beyond token multiculturalism and integrates diverse perspectives in meaningful ways (Caballero et al., 2007; Wardle & Cruz-Jansen, 2004). They emphasize the role that teachers play in shaping racial and ethnic-cultural identity and the importance of teacher training programs that equip educators to support the development of mixed identities in diverse classrooms (Williams, 2011; Winn Tutwiler, 2016).

Literature Review: School Experiences and Identity Dynamics of Mixed-Heritage Youth in Schools, with Particular Reference to the Context of Spain and Catalonia

The structure and logic of this state-of-the-art review have been developed to contrast the available international literature on the children of mixed couples at school and their identity dynamics with the state-of-the-question of our context.

Although the school population in Spain increasingly includes young people with mixed heritages, there is little qualitative research on their experiences and trajectories. They have been included *de facto* in studies of immigrants and education, which have concluded that the translation of stigmatizing cultural stereotypes of immigrant children from the economic periphery into low expectations and unequal treatment at school is what produces their academic behavior and results (Ballestín-González, 2011; Carrasco, 2003; Carrasco et al., 2011).

Research results on children from immigrant families at school in Spain are in line with the international literature that shows how school stratification takes on various forms and meanings that define the possibilities of belonging and lead to differentiated expectations for young people of foreign immigrant origin (Davidson, 1996; Gillborn, 1990). Exclusions resulting from stigmatization and low expectations have a significant impact not only on these young people's learning but also on their sociability and their possibilities for intercultural contact (Stearns, 2004), their academic and social identity constructions (Ballestín-González, 2008, 2011), and finally on their academic engagement (Ballestín-González, 2011, 2012, 2023; Davidson, 1996; Johnson et al., 2001).

Nevertheless, the school experiences of children of mixed parentage, who in Anglo-Saxon contexts and literature are referred to as *multiracial children*, are not equivalent to those of their peers from immigrant families, as their conditioning factors and identity dynamics are clearly different. They have often been seen as the hope for overcoming a world of stagnant ethnic identities, key agents for blurring the color lines, and eroding racial and cultural prejudices (Alba, 2009; Ali, 2003). The identities of multiracial youth are flexible rather than fixed. Joseph and Briscoe Smith (2021) stated that “a child whose parents are Black and White might identify as biracial at home and as African American at school because of his/her phenotype and identity with Black school friends” (p. xii).

The complex affiliations and experiences of young people of mixed origin take us further from the theoretical lens of disadvantage that is frequently used when researching the children of immigrants. Comparative analyses reveal distinctive and more positive social conditions and trajectories and more reflexive and successful educational experiences (Rumbaut, 2004, as cited in Mateus, 2021). Students of mixed origin have shown school advantages compared to the children of immigrants, although the performance of students with migrant backgrounds differs widely across countries (Kalmijn, 2015; Mateus, 2021).

However, mixed-heritage youth have very diverse, and unequal, identity constructions and inclusion/exclusion dynamics, depending on factors such as ancestry, race, gender, and class (Aspinall & Song, 2013; Brunsma, 2006; Ream, 2023; Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b; Song, 2017). Intersectionality is key to explaining the shaping of their school experiences (Winn Tutwiler, 2016). Not only are the identity choices of these young people constrained by social forces but also by the ethnic identity options of the dominant culture, which are not equally available to everyone. As a result, the dissonant experiences of bicultural children and adolescents can be stressful (Tarn et al., 2024; Zamora & Padilla, 2024). Ancestry and *visibility*, that is, in Jenkins's (1997, p. 66) words, "aspects of physical appearance, whether real or imaginary and typically crystallized in ethnic stereotypes", seem to be crucial factors in determining ethnic identity options. Our research included other capital *visibility* markers of difference from the native society, such as language or religious affiliation (Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b; Rodríguez-García, 2022).

Schools play a decisive role in constructing the social and ethnic-cultural identities of children of mixed and endogamous immigrant families who have a "biracial identity." The motivations and implications of claiming this biracial identity vary between racial/ethnic groups in different school contexts (Townsend et al., 2012). Joseph & Briscoe Smith (2021) explored the complexities of racial and ethnic identities in the classroom, focusing on the experiences of multiracial young people and how schools support or hinder their identity development. Their study showed how multiracial students navigate the intersecting pressures of societal expectations and the educational environment.

Students recognize that some people have more choices about how to self-identify, and some identifications require more substantiation than others (Burke & Kao, 2011; Caballero et al., 2007). However, multiracial students do not receive information at school about multiracial people or what it means to be a member of a multiracial group (Baxley, 2008; Winn Tutwiler, 2016). Scholars across the literature have pointed to the invisibility of multiraciality in the curriculum (Baxley, 2008; Campbell, 2020; Joseph & Briscoe-Smith, 2021).

Monoracism is an important factor that can influence these patterns (Campbell, 2020). It can be defined as a social system of inequality in which individuals who do not fit into monoracial categories may be oppressed on systemic and interpersonal levels because of underlying assumptions and beliefs in singular, discrete racial categories (Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Monoracism differs from traditional racism because it explicitly affects those who do not conform to dominant racial classifications (Harris, 2016). Manifestations of monoracism include microaggressions that exclude, isolate, exoticize, or objectify multiracial people (Nadal et al., 2011), along with denying a multiracial reality (Campbell, 2020; Johnston & Nadal, 2010). Its effects are significant factors in the identity development and schooling success of multiracial students.

Racism among teachers can often be disguised as *color blindness* (Bonilla-Silva, 2002). Previous research has shown that many educators, mostly White but not exclusively (Winn Tutwiler, 2016), engage in avoidance strategies when they discuss race and racism. Strategies such

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as *powerblindness* (Castagno, 2014) and *maintained ignorance* (Garrett & Segall, 2013) help sustain White privilege in educational settings. Some scholars argue for more nuanced discussions of White identity in teacher education to address these issues (Hambacher & Ginn, 2021).

In Spain, however, skin color and phenotype operate in complex ways along with other markers of difference, especially religion, that can be racialized and become an even more divisive, marginalizing force than *race* (Rodríguez-García, 2022). There is extreme prejudice against Muslims and against the partners in mixed Muslim-native marriages, which is also the case in other European countries (Kalmijn, 2015). Multiracial individuals in Spain, whether Black/White, Latino/White, Asian/White, or Arab/White, may experience their racialization and their identity options differently if they are perceived to have a Muslim (and in Spain specifically, Moroccan) background. In this case, a lighter skin color may not give them the same privileges as in a different national and cultural context (Onay, 2024; Rodríguez-García, 2022). In Spanish schools, some important ethno-cultural markers such as religion, namely islamophobia or rather *Moorphobia*[5], or even language -which adds further complexity in Catalonia as there are two co-official languages- can be racialized to levels equivalent to the phenotype. Indeed, children from Moroccan families, and to a lesser extent from other North African countries, are often seen and treated in primary and compulsory secondary schools as the epitome of "a culture" (subsumed in the Muslim religion) refractory to secular civic school values and therefore to integration into the majority -in the sense of hegemonic- school culture (Ballestín-González, 2008, 2011, 2012).

In the Catalan context, where our research was conducted, we must consider the interplay of nationalism when racism and xenophobia dynamics are considered. What makes the Catalan case more interesting for the analysis is precisely that Catalan nationalism has usually been depicted as a type of "integrative" or "civic" nationalism based on cultural and linguistic criteria (Clua, 2012), although there are certain researchers who have questioned whether Catalan society has been as integrative as it would wish (i.e., Aramburu, 2002 as cited in Clua, 2012) considering its contradictory political discourses on immigration.

Immigration has been a fundamental part of the demographic evolution of Catalonia. This immigration stream reached extreme peaks in two periods of Catalan history. The first was between 1961 and 1975 when Catalonia received a large influx of laborers, estimated at almost one million people, coming mainly from other Spanish regions. The second significant influx occurred between 2000 and 2010, when approximately another one million people arrived. These immigrants were generally from non-EU countries, mainly North Africa, especially the Maghreb, but also from sub-Saharan, South American and Eastern European countries (Clua, 2012).

We must also note the significant presence of immigrants from affluent countries, primarily Western European countries, many of whom have formed mixed couples and families in Spain. Significantly, these individuals are generally not referred to as "immigrants" but as "ex-pats". Findings show that they are the most privileged when it comes to passing as "invisible" in terms of mixedness or being associated with a category of "foreigner" with prestige, relatively high status, and cultural recognition (Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b). However, because most research on the topic is in the Anglo-Saxon context (UK and USA), we do not know much about the school experiences of mixed families in Southern Europe with a progenitor from an affluent country, and even less when we refer to our context, Spain.

[5]Moorphobia in Spain dates back to the Reconquista, a Christian-Muslim conflict predating the Spanish Empire. "Moroccan" now becomes a signifier of Muslim "otherness", more so than for other less established Muslim immigrant groups such as Pakistanis or West Africans (Mateo, 1997; Rodríguez-García, 2022).

The existant literature on mixed-race pupils in European schools is almost exclusively situated in the UK context, with a few exceptions, such as the study by Mateus (2021) in Portugal or Azzolini et al. (2017) in Italy. Our research aims to make an exploratory first contribution in Spain, which can be a basis for further comparative studies in the future.

Sample and Methodology

The data were obtained from semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted in Catalonia between 2017 and 2018 as part of a research project about the identities and everyday experiences of mixed youth in Spain. We worked with a sample of 90 interviews with young people aged between 14 and 30. The theoretical sample for selecting cases was constructed to collect a wide range of cases according to key variables that influence the identity constructions of mixed-race young people in relation to their social participation, as well as their potential attitudes towards exclusion. The selected variables included gender, the origin of the father and mother (balancing the cases of immigrant fathers and mothers), racialization based on phenotype, and religion (classifying cases as Muslim or non-Muslim). For instance, in the case of the descendants of mixed Spanish-immigrant couples, who constituted the core of the research and the largest group (58 cases), the distribution was as follows: male (23), female (35); racialized (34), non-racialized (24); Muslim religion (32), non-Muslim religion (36). The final distribution demonstrates a certain equilibrium, and the primary challenge encountered during the fieldwork was the possibility of interviewing young men to achieve a more balanced representation of men and women.

In all cases, respondents were selected using personal connections, advertisements, and contacts with migrant associations in different parts of Catalonia. Snowballing was avoided as much as possible to minimize the introduction of bias. The team continually evaluated the selection of cases to obtain as heterogeneous a sample as possible. The interviews were conducted simultaneously with the transcription and coding of the material, which made it possible to evaluate the level of saturation of the information collected in the field, and to make appropriate changes to the sample when necessary. The substantial number of cases interviewed, coupled with the meticulous selection of participants, has led to a high degree of confidence in the quality and veracity of the collected information.

Out of the 90 cases examined, 76 were descendants of mixed couples: 58 respondents had a native Spanish parent and a foreign-born parent, and 19 had two parents born in a different foreign country (e.g., Colombia/Germany). We also included nine descendants of endogamous immigrant couples, and five from Spanish native couples, which served as a control group. Most young people interviewed were born in Spain (73%), followed by 13% in European countries, 9% in Central or South America, 2% in Maghreb countries, and 2% in North America.

Table 1 illustrates the geographical (large areas) distribution of the parents of our informants. There was a notable prevalence of families with a Spanish mother and a foreign-born father. In the case of foreign mothers, the majority came from two specific regions: Central and South America, and Europe. Conversely, male parents were from a more diverse range of areas.

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Table 1

Progenitors by Place of Birth, by Gender

Place of Birth	Male Progenitors (%)	Female Progenitors (%)
Spain	25.6	45.6
Europe	21.1	15.6
North Africa and the Maghreb	14.4	8.9
Middle East	5.6	1.1
Sub-Saharan Africa	10.0	5.6
Central and South America	16.7	21.1
North America	2.2	1.1
Asia	4.4	1.1

Note. Authors' compilation based on the study sample

The preferred age group for the interviews was 14-29 years, the official age range used by the Catalan Youth Agency to define "youth", which is also the most predominant age group for descendants of mixed couples in Catalonia according to the Catalan Youth Survey 2017. Most of our interviewees were between 21 and 25 (40%), and between 16 and 20 (37.8%). The wide age range considered resulted in an internal diversity in terms of the life stage of the respondents, from living at home with their parents and still studying Compulsory Secondary Education, to being independent and even having formed a family of their own. A total of 54 of the interviewees were girls (60%), and 36 were boys (40%). Regarding their main activity, 72% were full-time students, only 14% had a job as their primary activity, and 9% combined studies and work. Most respondents lived in Barcelona or cities/towns in the Barcelona metropolitan area.

The interview guide was organized into eight different sections: the migratory trajectory of the immigrant parent(s); daily life and family dynamics; customs, religious beliefs and practices; social and political participation; education, socializing and leisure activities; friendships, transnationalism, identity and sense of belonging; experiences of discrimination; and life satisfaction and future (for more detail see Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b). In the section on education, we specifically asked questions about their school life in both primary and secondary education, their positive and negative experiences concerning their mixed background, and whether they had experienced any kind of discrimination at school.

The interviews were conducted in Catalan or Spanish and lasted an average of one hour. Participants were given an information sheet and a consent form before the interview, and confidentiality was guaranteed (all names quoted in the paper are fictitious). Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and codified with the ATLAS.ti qualitative software, mainly using codes established previously (concept-driven) but also with some *in vivo* coding (data-driven). A provisional codebook was compiled to facilitate the analysis process, accompanied by its corresponding definitions derived from the interview script. Thereafter, two researchers from the team coded a series of interviews using this codebook. These codes were further refined by introducing new codes and rephrasing some of the previously proposed codes. Subsequently, we began the process of coding systematically, constructing memos, and identifying relationships between codes for the content analysis of the interviews. The initial coding work was carried out by one of the researchers involved in the project; however, the three researchers who have authored this article were collectively involved in constructing memos and interpreting the resulting data in

the detailed analysis of the topics dealt with in this article, which relate to the world of education. The coding process always left room for new themes and codes. For instance, the analysis of the interviews identified education as an environment characterized by conflict and various forms of discrimination.

The research team consists of six researchers, four of whom are senior members and two recently finished their Ph. Ds. There are two male researchers and four female researchers, one of whom is racialized. The team's professional career is based on the study of international migration in Spain, focusing on the following topics: the formation processes of mixed couples, the identity construction of young immigrants and descendants of mixed couples, as well as the processes of exclusion and rejection of these young people in different contexts, from the public space to the school. This provides a solid theoretical basis and extensive fieldwork carried out in different research projects, giving rise to a large corpus of publications on these topics. The researchers adhered to the principles and methodologies of *microethics* (Hosseini & Haukas, 2025), encompassing the concepts of situatedness, relationality, negotiation and embodiment in the decision-making process throughout the research.

Results. School experiences and identity constructions of mixed parentage children and young people in primary and compulsory secondary education in Catalonia

"Where Are You From?": Navigating from Invisibility to Immigrant Status at School

The experiences of pupils from mixed-heritage families in navigating their identities in school settings can be understood through key concepts such as racialization, identity negotiation, and belonging. As we have seen in the literature review, mixed-heritage students often experience racialization in school environments, where their identities are questioned and scrutinized (Song, 2017, 2003). The seemingly innocent question, *"Where are you from?"*, can be a microaggression (Nadal et al., 2011), positioning them as perpetual outsiders. These students often exist in an in-between space, neither fully invisible nor entirely recognized as belonging. However, depending on the racial and ethnic-cultural background of their immigrant parent, they may transition from being invisible to being treated as immigrants, particularly if their non-European ancestry is emphasized (Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b). Therefore, not everybody has the same opportunities to "negotiate" identities at school.

It became evident from the interviews that schools and teachers did not recognize young people with foreign parents from Western or non-stigmatized countries as children of immigrants. Therefore, they were free to choose when and where to reveal their mixedness to benefit from it. They recognized that they had advantages at school, mainly because of their knowledge of the socially prestigious and academically valuable languages of Western schooling (English, French and German), their greater access to private schools with European vehicular languages, the cosmopolitanism attributed to their families by teachers and school staff, and the often-expressed desire to study and work abroad. The following statements of participants illustrate this point:

> I went to primary school at a private international school in Sant Cugat, and the teachers always said, 'Of course, since you're mixed, you're more open-minded...'
> (Eva, 24, Greek father, Spanish mother).
> Being able to speak English has always helped me a lot. I always get 10s in English. This always raises my marks. (…). It's given me more points of view, because speaking another language helps you see more things.

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(Sean, 18, English father, Spanish mother)

For young people with a White parent from Latin American countries, most of them followed school trajectories very similar to those of their native or "invisible" mixed counterparts. They often went unnoticed as children of mixed families by teachers and classmates, mainly due to the proximity of the language, even with their slightly different color (unless they were Afro-descendants or clearly visible as Native American descendants). They were more likely to perform liminal identities. Within the mixed Mexican group, for example, made up mostly of families with highly qualified parents in terms of education and professional status, statements similar to those of Juana, who studied in private schools, were found:

> I've always enjoyed studying and have always done well, to be honest. Both at the German school in Sitges, and at University. (…). I have always wanted to have a (University) career.
>
> (Juana, 23, Mexican father, Spanish mother).

Mateus (2021) obtained similar outcomes in the Portuguese context, which is significant because Portugal is also a Mediterranean country in southern Europe. The students from relatively affluent, mostly White, mixed families had, and in many cases were aware of, the cultural capital (in terms of Bourdieu) that mixedness implied for them in terms of schooling and, eventually, in their expectations of upward social mobility. Moreover, they frequently expressed transnational belonging, which was seen as an advantage and cultural capital for their educational and professional future. This enabled them to frame their lives symbolically in a transcultural scenario.

In sharp contrast, respondents with a racialized parent from an economically marginalized and culturally stigmatized country suffered in the classroom from racialization and, therefore, from the projection of the same negative stereotypes and imaginaries attributed to their peers from endogamous immigrant families from the same countries of origin. This is particularly true in relation to countries such as Morocco and North Africa, as well as Asia (China), sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America (Ecuador, Colombia, etc.).

A feeling of otherness, and their teachers and classmates questioning them about their country of origin were everyday experiences among this group. As Luz stated:

> And it still happens now with some teachers; they say ‘And your surname, where is it from?’ And I have to say that my father is from Morocco. (…). They are already labeling me as not being from here, I don't like it.
>
> (Luz, 22, Moroccan father, Spanish mother).

This comment shows how educators, consciously or unconsciously, contribute to identity ascription by reinforcing labels tied to ethnicity and nationality. Some teachers may adopt a colorblind approach, which can overlook the unique identity struggles of mixed-heritage youth, while others may reinforce monoracial categorizations, contributing to identity dissonance for these students (Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004; Winn Tutwiler, 2016). Some may express benevolent racism—assuming mixed-heritage pupils have innate language skills or cultural insights—while others may exoticize or problematize their backgrounds (Campbell, 2020; Williams, 2011). These dynamics impact students' self-perception and classroom participation.

Mixed-race young people from stigmatized ethnic-cultural origins often have similar school experiences to those of students of endogamous immigrant origin (Lewis & Demie, 2019), conveyed through the teaching staff’s low expectations for them and lack of communication or even conflict with teachers.

Teacher-student relationships shape racialized school experiences, particularly for minority and mixed-race students. This can be seen in the following statement:

> The Head of Studies just had it in for me from the beginning (...). I didn't understand how they could suspend me if I got good marks just for my behavior. I made a mess of things, I wasn't comfortable.
> (Adila, 24, Tunisian father, Spanish mother).

The dissonance between the self-perceived mixed or "autochthonous" identity and the external perception of otherness (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Song, 2017) is evident in many informal school teaching/learning situations:

> If you want to play Jaume I[6] in a theatre performance, first, they tell you that you're not a boy, and then they say you're Black
> (Gema, 39, Spanish father, Guinean mother).

Often, racialized boys and girls from mixed families involving African countries were acutely aware of being stereotyped as poor, with low family educational attainment and low expectations regarding their academic performance and prospects in the school-to-work transition:

> My skin color is associated with my supposed economic situation, even though they know nothing about me (...) At school, they directly relate the fact of being Black with the fact that I should have a low level of culture in general, and that 'You are too smart to be from another country', or 'You are too smart to be Black' (…) Why can't I be smart, or can't I have money just because of my color?
> (Aida, 14, Senegalese father, Spanish mother).

These respondents revealed a link between negative race-based experiences and their personal self-perception of skin tone: self-esteem was related to skin tone bias and racism (Stamps et al., 2022).

In the case of students from mixed families of Moroccan and North African origin, the key factors that seemed to shape their academic identities were the degree of visibility of their phenotype and the extent to which they adopted or distanced themselves from stigmatizing religious and cultural markers. The fact and risk of being associated with the label "Moor" permeated relationships with teachers and peers at school. However, these pupils had relatively more chances, compared to Black mixed peers, of avoiding racialization and enabling strategies of passing as local and identity shifting in order to minimize the discrimination they would otherwise face (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002). This statement by Saida, who was considered a good student and successful throughout her academic trajectory, is very eloquent on this point:

> R: The truth is I have done very well. I have always been one of the best in my class, in primary school and secondary school. People tell me that I don't look half-Moroccan.
> I: Did your mother also go unnoticed? Did she wear a headscarf?
> R: No, she didn't... they called her "the Andalusian"... She was treated, well, normal…
> (Saida, 17, Spanish father, Moroccan mother).

Thus, when more favorable and advantageous experiences were found among this group of Moroccan and North African origins, we repeatedly observed the recognition of the fact of passing phenotypically as Spanish, that is, being invisible as Moroccans or having distanced themselves from the religious and cultural heritage of their foreign progenitor.

[6] This refers to Jaume I of Aragon, the Conqueror, an emblematic historical figure in Catalonia.

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From Popularity to "Shitty Moor/Nigger": Disparities in Peer Sociability of Mixed-Parentage Young People at School

Mixed-heritage students may be seen as outsiders or insiders depending on how they perform or present their identity in school. Some mixed-heritage young people can move between different social groups, capitalizing on their ability to blend in and "pass" in multiple cultural settings, while others experience exclusion or isolation due either to racialization or to the perceived ambiguous nature of their identity (Ream, 2023; Song, 2017, 2003). Peer sociability can be shaped by how classmates accept or reject their mixed identities and whether they are categorized as "other" or "normal." This often involves racial and cultural stereotyping, frequently based on monoracist stereotypes (Campbell, 2020; Johnston & Nadal, 2010), which can either help or hinder the social integration of mixed-heritage pupils. As we will see, in some cases, mixed-heritage students may be perceived as having privileged status because they may look like the dominant group (e.g., lighter skin or European features). In other cases, they may be racialized as "other" by their peers, depending on how they embody their mixed ethnicities. The experience of racialization or being *racially ambiguous* can create barriers to peer acceptance, mainly if their peers have a limited understanding of mixed-heritage identities (Song, 2017).

Our findings show that mixed children whose immigrant parent is White, commonly from another Western European country, are generally well integrated in school peer groups. In contrast, those whose ethno-racial heritage involves a negatively stigmatized group in Spain (particularly of Maghrebian or Black-African descent) reported more experiences of exclusion and segregation, and feelings of isolation similar to those identified by Lewis & Demie (2019) and Kalmijn (2015).

Among young people who come from culturally "invisible" (to the eyes of mainstream society in Spain) mixed families, there were more experiences of inclusion and even popularity within peer groups:

> I think it was always positive for me because I have a Dutch father and a French mother, and it sounded good; it was interesting. It was more positive than discriminatory.
> (Juliana, 25, Dutch father, French mother).

When they mentioned negative experiences at school, they were more likely to refer to a sense of envy or comparative grievances expressed by their peers about their language advantages (a higher level of English) or their parents' higher level of education.

In clear contrast, among interviewees with a parent from Morocco, Sub-Saharan Africa, or Asia, experiences of racist discrimination and verbal or physical aggression were unfortunately quite recurrent. Thus, identity dissonance (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002) and disengagement from school peer networks were frequent. Perhaps one of the more appalling testimonies that illustrates these dynamics is Albert, who suffered open verbal and physical harassment from his peers:

> When they insulted me in high school, I couldn't say anything because I would get fifty of them on me. They called me 'fucking nigger', (…). Sometimes, I would go home almost in tears because I didn't know what to do, I didn't want to tell a teacher because it wasn't worth it.
> (Albert, 20, father from Cameroon, French mother)

In some cases, among informants of mixed Black families, experiences of racialization at school had led study participants to develop Black pride or ethno-racial belonging concerning the immigrant parent, manifesting the *One-drop rule* seen in the North American context (Peery & Bodenhausen, 2008; Williams, 2011). This could be related to the finding (Burke & Kao, 2011)

that among Black/White (and Asian/White) adolescents, those who self-identify as *White* tend to become more disadvantaged in school given the dissonance between their self-perception and their socially attributed cultural/race identity. For example, Justina (20), with an afro-descent mother from the Dominican Republic, told us that she always introduced herself in secondary school as Black: "Yes, at home my mother has always called me '*mi negrita*', and at school too. I am '*la negra*', and I don't feel offended at all."

Our results also show how mixed-heritage young people are often positioned in an "in-between" space, where they do not fully belong to either of the cultural or ethnic groups they identify with. This status can lead to feelings of alienation, as they may find themselves excluded from both the dominant group and the minority group (Rockquemore & Brunsma, 2002; Root, 2003). This exclusion is especially acute in environments where there is intense social pressure to conform to binary racial classifications (e.g., Black or White, Moroccan or Spanish). Some young people from the Black collective felt trapped in the dynamics of monoracism (Johnston & Nadal, 2010; Winn Tutwiler, 2016). As Erica put it:

> So, I suffer racism from the White side, and I suffer the reaction from the Black side, because I have more privileges than a person who is blacker than me. (…) Black people don't see me as Black, and White people don't see me as White, so I'm like, 'Well, what's going on here?'
> (Erica, 18, Brazilian father, Colombian mother).

In the case of Samanta, the pressure from monoracist attitudes led her to divide her birthday celebrations:

> I realized that my friends of Gambian and Senegalese origin are always prejudiced. When someone (White) looks at them, it's like 'They're looking at me badly because I'm Black'. So, I ended up having two parties.
> (Samanta, 22, Senegalese father, Spanish mother)

Among the Moroccan respondents, the strategy, when (phenotypically) possible, of distancing oneself from the stigmatized religious and cultural origins had a crucial impact not only on academic trajectories but also on the dynamics of these mixed pupils' sociability with classmates and peers at school:

> My school friends have always known me as a normal person, not with any label. I also consider myself to be from here and always speak Catalan.... Maybe it would have been different if I had worn a headscarf, if I had identified myself as a Muslim…
> (Nadja, 17, Moroccan father, Spanish mother).

All these experiences and strategies were undoubtedly influenced by the teachers' role in the discriminatory peer dynamics experienced by mixed-heritage students through their racial perceptions, intervention strategies and classroom practices. Educators have an important influence on shaping intergroup peer relations. They are key mediators in understanding how racial bias in school settings contributes to the marginalization of students of color, including mixed students.

Our research shows that in Spain, there is still no explicit consideration of the specificities and risks of school disadvantage that young people from mixed families with a parent from a culturally minoritized/stigmatized country may experience. Many of our interviewees who had been victims of racist aggressions stated that they had not sought help from teachers because they expected teachers to be passive or minimize the importance of these aggressions. Albert (20, Cameroonian father, French mother), who suffered more-evident racist attacks, confessed that he had never told his teachers about them, and not even his parents: "I didn't tell anyone. You're the first person to know... I've never told anyone; I've always put up with it."

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Among those informants who had approached teachers to report bullying or aggression from classmates, there were numerous experiences of teachers doing nothing, tending to underestimate the impact of the aggression, with the argument that the mixed-race pupils were "already from here". Such narratives reveal that in our country, teachers are still unaware of the seriousness that the forms of discrimination and segregation among peers can take concerning students from mixed families. Teachers were mainly indifferent to the multiracial identities of these students, did not discuss them and did not adjust their teaching or change the curriculum to include learning about multiracial individuals (Campbell, 2020; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004; Winn Tutwiler, 2016).

Discussion and Conclusions

The general objective of this article was to examine the experiences and trajectories of children and young people with mixed parentage in primary and secondary education in Spain, with a particular focus on Catalonia, from a qualitative perspective. Our results are an initial exploratory study that paves the way for further research on the educational experiences and identity dynamics of children and young people with mixed origins in Spain. This is a growing phenomenon that has not yet been extensively studied.

In our research, we posed a series of initial questions that have shaped the interpretation of the results:

What specific school experiences do mixed parentage young people have in Catalonia (Spain)? What is the role of racialization?

The experiences of mixed-heritage young people at school in Spain are quite complex and polarized when compared with previous research on the topic, partly because international literature—dominated by Anglo-Saxon perspectives—has overlooked cases in which the foreign parent comes from a culturally equivalent or higher-status background. Spain's unique position as a southern European country shapes this phenomenon. Historically perceived as "less European" by Northern and Anglo-Saxon countries, Spain has faced internal racialization (e.g., being depicted as "Moorish" or "less White"). Unlike the UK and the USA, where race is structured around Whiteness and legacies of slavery and colonialism, Spain's racialization, as we have shown, is more tied to ethnicity, language, and religion, affecting groups like North African migrants and Romani people (Grosfoguel, 2007; Rodríguez-García et al., 2021c).

These diverse dynamics permeate school experiences. In the UK and USA contexts, mixed-heritage pupils are often racialized within rigid categories that derive from colonial histories and transatlantic slavery. For example, in the UK, mixed White/Black Caribbean students are often perceived either as Black or as having identity struggles, which can contribute to their marginalization in school settings (Tikly et al., 2004). In contrast, mixed-heritage students in Spain may not experience the same binary racial classifications but can be racialized based on cultural and linguistic differences, particularly if they have North African, Latin American, or Romani backgrounds (Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b). However, our findings show that mixed-race young people of African descent, regardless of their country of origin, are also racialized as Black and subjected to experiences of identity dissonance (Zamora & Padilla, 2024) and exclusion at school resulting from monoracist attitudes and the unwritten laws of the *One-drop rule*, as we have shown through their testimonies.

In Spain, the educational experiences of mixed students are shaped by different sociocultural hierarchies, where factors such as migrant status and cultural background influence school inclusion more than racial identity alone. The different school experiences of mixed-heritage pupils in Spain vs. Anglo-Saxon countries result from historical legacies, racial vs. cultural frameworks, and differing education policies. While UK/USA schools focus on racial identity and multiculturalism (Tikly et al., 2004), Spain's schools emphasize linguistic and cultural assimilation or integration (Aparicio & Portes, 2021; Ballestín-González, 2008, 2011; Carrasco, 2003; Carrasco et al., 2011), shaping how mixed-heritage students experience belonging and exclusion. In the answer to the following question, we further explore the specificity of the school experiences of young people from mixed families.

What are the differences and inequalities among mixed-heritage pupils at the academic and relational levels?

Consistent with the previous statements, our findings show a highly polarized scenario of school experiences. At the pole of successful narratives and cultural capitalization of family background at school, we found informants from mixed couples with one European parent or with an affluent Western cultural background. These young people were invisible as children of immigrants and/or had a more advantageous use of mixed socio-cultural capital (transnational personal networks, multilingualism, etc.) (Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b), more identity choices and a higher capacity for personal agency. This was positively reflected in the school arena (Mateus, 2021; Kalmijn, 2015), both at the learning level and social (popularity in peer relationships) levels.

On the other hand, mixed children and young people with a non-European or non-White parent, especially those who were racialized and stigmatized because of their perceived distinctive visible features (e.g. having a darker phenotype or being perceived as a Moroccan Muslim because of their appearance, name or accent), experienced more restrictions on their identity choices, which were more constrained and problematized as they continued to be seen as "not belonging". They perceived a more significant identity mismatch (Song, 2017, 2003) or dissonance and conflict (Tarn et al., 2024; Zamora & Padilla, 2024) between their chosen identity (as mixed or native) and their ascribed identity (as immigrant or foreigner), as well as more restrictions on the use of their multiple backgrounds (i.e. the rejection of their immigrant parents' origin, languages and transnational networks, Rodríguez-García et al., 2021b). This could increase discrimination and exclusion at school, affecting their academic careers.

To what extent does the role played by peers and teachers contribute to shaping these differential experiences and identities?

Our informants' school experiences of engagement and disengagement were primarily shaped by sociability and school climate dynamics (Ballestín-González, 2023), which influenced their future aspirations. Our results are consistent with those of previous studies (Campbell, 2020; Lewis & Demie, 2019; Williams, 2011) that found that students attending ethnoculturally diverse schools are more likely to be identified as mixed rather than monoracial or monocultural, and that through peer group acceptance or rejection, mixed-heritage students may experience exclusion, microaggressions or "identity policing." We also found that the role of teachers in the social dynamics of the classroom and their academic expectations in line with their conceptions of mixedness (Turner, 2024) were key factors in modulating experiences of belonging or

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disengagement from school (Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004; Williams, 2011; Winn Tutwiler, 2016). The results suggest that guidance and specific support from teachers and school authorities is crucial, not only in terms of academic tasks and career guidance, but also and especially in terms of their attitudes and actions/inhibitions in the face of racist aggression.

What can schools do from here on? The increase in the number of students from mixed-parent families in Spanish classrooms requires educators to examine their teaching practices beyond mere color evasiveness and assess any potential adjustments that could be implemented to acknowledge and accommodate this population. What Wardle & Cruz-Janzen (2004) noted at an international level is even more evident in Spain: mixed-race students are "totally invisible in the schools' curriculum: no stories, pictures, articles and reports, books or textbook items that reflect their unique family experiences" (p. 13). Although our paper did not focus directly on educational structures and policies, some recommendations for educators emerge from our findings and the scholarship (Caballero et al., 2007; Campbell, 2020; Halpern, 2019; Joseph & Briscoe-Smith, 2021; Peng, 2024; Wardle & Cruz-Janzen, 2004; Winn Tutwiler, 2016). The following is a summary of practical strategies for fostering inclusive school environments that recognize the value of hybridity and mixedness:

- It is imperative that educators recognize and value mixed identities. To this end, they should move beyond monolithic racial or ethnic-cultural categories and acknowledge the fluid and intersectional nature of these identities.
- Creating culturally responsive classrooms is also paramount, with curricula and pedagogical approaches that reflect diverse backgrounds and incorporate narratives that include mixed-heritage perspectives.
- Schools should encourage open dialogue on race, ethnicity and identity issues. This dialogue should allow students to explore their ethnic-cultural or racial identities in a safe and supportive environment.
- It is crucial to provide educators with training in *racial literacy* (Harris, 2016). Professional development should include training in racial identity formation and the distinctive experiences of mixed-heritage students. This is particularly important in Spain, where educational practitioners continue to avoid confronting racism, and instead focus exclusively on cultural and linguistic assimilation, or intercultural integration (Aparicio & Portes, 2021; Ballestín-González, 2011; Carrasco, 2003).
- At the sociability level, it is important that teachers are equipped to recognize and challenge the subtle forms of racism and prejudice that students from mixed backgrounds may encounter.
- Inclusive peer relationships need to be fostered by establishing programs in educational institutions to promote positive social interactions among students of diverse ethnic-cultural and racial backgrounds.

In conclusion, race and ethnicity are critical aspects of students' self-identities and school experiences, and young people of mixed-heritage present a particular challenge to educators because they reveal that race, in whatever iteration, is intricate. However, the concepts of *multiraciality* and *multiethnicity*, in all their complexity, can support socially just and race-conscious pedagogy. Our contribution asserts that to do so and to create change, scholars and educational agents need to bring the concerns of mixed parentage students to the discussion on racialization and inclusion/exclusion dynamics at school (Caballero et al., 2007). Educational policies should cover these young people's needs to have their identities recognized and understood as part of the overall diversity of society and to be protected from racist abuse.

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The authors report that there are no competing interests to declare.

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