

King – Education and Social Networks as Key Factors for Inclusion

By Andrea Latorre

King is a 24-year-old from the Dominican Republic who came to live in Barcelona two and a half years ago, after having obtained a grant to study for his master's degree. He was interviewed twice, over the course of a year, by two members of the team, and on both occasions got enthusiastically involved in a comprehensive and detailed account of his migratory process, taking a clear position on various issues. The second interview took place at his home and throughout his neighbourhood, where he was invited to take photographs of those things he considered meaningful to his life.

King's case is a clear example of a migratory process in which inclusive aspects predominate, emphasizing the importance of education, participation in associations and social networks, all made possible fundamentally through the economic and emotional support from his family.



A transnational family: “...everybody has a cousin in New York...”

Migrations have characterized King's family history, especially to the United States. His father and his father's family lived there for many years, his grandparents on his mother's side also, though more recently.

“... my dad, my mother did it, they did it, of the seven of my father's brothers, four of them made it, eh ... and around there is where they all went, and from there I always got used to also seeing a family like that, fragmented, because I had someone who lived here and there ... There is a very popular saying in the Dominican Republic that goes, ‘everybody has a cousin in New York’, as the issue of migration has been very strong”.

In a similar vein, his mother emigrated to Switzerland when King was younger, working primarily as a cleaning lady or babysitter. Since then he and his brother have been left in charge of his maternal grandparents, regularly receiving remittances that allowed for the maintenance of all four of them. Thus, at close to 40 years of age, his grandmother left her job as a factory worker and she and her retired husband devoted

themselves to raising their grandchildren. The relationship between all them is very good, and King currently retains a close bond with his grandmother, whom he considers to be his mother. In this way, the context of King's life developed in a transnational family (in frequent contact with his mother and sporadically with his father), in a country where this occurs with some normalcy.

Education: commitment and investment in an exclusionary society.

The public system has many deficiencies, and in that regard, a private system guarantees certain things.

In a country with large class differences, such as the Dominican Republic, access to quality education, being part of the waged sector, represents a major effort, and that was something the King's family had as a clear priority. From elementary school onwards King and his brother attended a private school in order to guarantee the quality of their training, given that public education would have been far from capable of doing so. The school is located in a neighbourhood distinct from the one they live in, and King has very few friends there, as his grandparents would prefer for him to be at home, perhaps as a way of protecting him from an environment that, to them, does not seem appropriate. King recalls himself as follows:

"I was always very outgoing but very shy, I was a bookworm, I always came home from school, went straight to my house, I stayed home all day, I didn't go out because I got used to not doing so ... We lived in a neighbourhood, and I don't know if it's because my grandparents didn't like it and that, but I had two or three friends in the neighbourhood, but I never went out on week days to play with the others, I never went out to play, never".

By early adolescence his mother decided that it would be better for her children to live alone, and so began a new stage where they were to live in a house in the neighbouring district to that of their grandparents, and were to have the help of a cleaning lady for the household chores. King went to a different school, where they had to wait a long time to get him a place; and where he met his group of friends, both in school and in the neighbourhood, helping him to expand and consolidate his social life, a key element for his future. This new life gave him great independence and he learned how to take on responsibilities while combining them with an excellent academic performance.

"...it was a ... a good stage; as an adult I already had several groups that I met up with, former work colleagues or people from University with whom I had shared professional interests, or classmates, or friends I made along the way, or whatever, people who I met who had nothing to do with any of these areas, and

ultimately I integrated them very well in my life, for example. Eh ... of these, I am still in contact with some of them, I keep in touch with them, eh ..."

Further on, born of an activity he did in high school, he decided to study International Relations at university.

"[The activity] was a simulation of how the United Nations functions, how it is organized ... it invited all the schools and then each student was given the role of an ambassador of a country before a United Nations body, it fell to me to represent Bolivia and I was like the ambassador to the legal committee of the General Assembly, and it gave me a very wide perspective ... different things as it was an international relations degree, then I would discover, it was multidisciplinary, you had to know a little of everything".

A migratory trajectory tied to education

In order to improve his job prospects and professional development he planned to continue his studies abroad, but it was difficult to cover the costs, so he applied for various grants without much hope, as access to them is linked to corruption and precarious conditions. However, he was eventually accepted into an International Relations master's program in Barcelona by a Spanish foundation. King had already been to Europe when he visited his mother in Switzerland, and he was more attracted to studying here than in the United States, the most frequent destination for Dominicana students and that with which he shared most cultural similarities. He wanted something different, almost exotic, and that's what Europe represented for him, in addition to it being a cradle of history and arts.

The acceptance of the grant meant King had to reconsider his present and future options: to leave his job, and his sister, who was born in Switzerland and who, at age 15, had been living with him for a year in the Dominican Republic. From that point on he began to consider the possibility of staying in Spain permanently, if he found favourable conditions, the grant did not oblige him to return to his country and settle there for a specified period as is the case with government grants, an aspect that he valued. In fact, as you will soon learn, after having finished his Master's and having made the obligatory trip back to his country of origin, King returned to Barcelona with the intent of settling down.

"Yes, according to the contract, that was also another incentive for not seeking a government grant, because I was aware that maybe a better opportunity might arise, but had not explicitly

planned on it, but if the opportunity arose I was not going to say no, which I believe is normal in any human being ... unless you're too tied down, because I had no roots, I don't have a family, I have no children, I have nothing”.

Upon arriving in Barcelona for his studies, King was able to depend on a number of advantages in addition to the financial support of the grant, among others, his legal status (student visa) and networks that facilitated access to housing. However, he remembers the difficulties he encountered in reaching a new place and starting his process of adaptation.

“It was very hard, the first months, the first term above all, because here we have, here in Europe they run on a very different study rhythm from that of the American, the scheme for the teacher/student relationship is very different and adapting to that was very difficult. And to that you add the fact that when you come here you'll be eating different food, you have to ... it's not the same, when you go shopping and you know what you're going to buy or wasting two hours in the supermarket because you have to find out what's there, uh ... people are different, their way, a language, like it or not it makes a difference, that is ... how people treat you and how they look at you, personal ... socially, and that's why I say it was very hard, eh ...”



Image: When everything else was closed, King spent his first new year's eve in Barcelona here ; a very different party atmosphere from those he was accustomed to in the Dominican Republic.

Language as a barrier to inclusion

For King linguistic aspects hold particular significance. He considers that, despite his efforts, it was the principal barrier to inclusion, especially in the workplace.

“I had heard the expression ‘Catalan’, a few times in my life, but hadn’t the slightest idea, then when I came here, it was not the first time I was on the metro, but in my country there was no underground until last year, but I didn’t use it, but, what is that? Is it French? No, it would be ... but what ... but what, is it Portuguese? I know a little Portuguese and decided that no, but ... ‘casa teva’ (Catalan) ... or whatever ... I know some Portuguese so I was like ... What’s up? And well, nothing, unfortunately it was my fault, I came here as a total virgin, I mean, I knew absolutely nothing, and as I progressed it was I that had to start looking for it ... they speak a different language, the culture has its own identity, that I don’t know anything about, and it has been a process of adaptation, totally new to me.

There are jobs, for example, where it is not essential to have a level C in Catalan, with a fairly good level, for example being able to speak to a customer, if you have a very good understanding of Catalan, it’s sufficient, but no, here there are places where if you do not have a perfect level, you don’t get it, and for example, it’s very difficult to find a foreigner who speaks other languages ... one or more native languages, to get here and achieve a perfect level of Catalan, unless you’ve lived here for 10, 15, years, for example, you know what I mean?

So if someone turns up with some knowledge of Castilian (Spanish), it’s not as if they are going to be mean, but if they came with some knowledge of Catalan, it would be much better, because as they see that you have that ... that enthusiasm for learning it, and that opens doors for you, there is a difference in the treatment you get, for me, that would be the main barrier, as then the cultural issue is not, because it is something new, something you learn ...”

Work and Social Networks

From secondary school onwards King started working, for instance tasks for a few of his friend’s mothers in order to earn extra money. But it was to be in college that he would work on something that was to mark his future: an NGO associated with the

United Nations that taught its operating model. There he worked as a volunteer and gradually acquired additional responsibility when he was promoted to the level of an assistant. He gathered extensive experience, contacts and a certain economic independence from the position. His job ended when the NGO learned that members of his family were participating in a political party in opposition to the one that financed them. Shortly after, he did his university training in the delegation of the OAS in his country.

“Because it was, I think it was one of the jobs that I liked most because I felt good, did something that I wanted to do, that I liked and was moreover within an area of study I was doing, how the conferences and activities were organized, not only gave me knowledge ... of how things were done, but also of the issues that we were concerned with, that I met one or another ambassador, an important exhibitor and therefore I’d say it was very ... very important for me, that time”.

After emigrating to Barcelona with the help of his educational grant, he quickly made links with other young people at his University and made resources available (time / money) to devote to study and participation in associations, so as to build social networks and enjoy his leisure time. This gave continuity to his life, and allows him to enhance the aspects that favour his process of inclusion.

“During my master’s, my circle of friends was made up exclusively of people I’d met in the master’s, or connected to it, Catalans, Colombians, people from Madrid ... they were very, very good friends, for better and for worse, if we had to share notes it would be the same for ‘ah, I need you to comfort me because my mother broke her leg and I can’t be there to help her’, things like that. Eh ... life in general has been comfortable, there are many things that seem logical and others not-so-logical”.



Image: Playing at friends' houses: a leisure option that King associates with his country of origin and often puts into practice Barcelona.

“I will have been here for two years in September. I have had a great time, I’ve seen many parts of the geography and of the ... of the geography and the culture, this ... I’ve also done extracurricular activities such as courses, seminars, conferences ... and now I’m involved in some association projects that are also part of something that I started in Santo Domingo, on the subject that I mentioned before, of my desire to help people in some form, of ... of that goal, and now I am a member of two associations, two groups, two NGOs, working for ... providing assistance and services to a .. mainly professionals, to students or people who for academic reasons above all, have to travel to Catalonia, and ... not only that move to Catalonia but those that already reside here”.

King’s area of professional interest is closely linked to civic participation and in Catalonia he puts it into practise in associations that work on issues close to those of his own experience as an immigrant, and with people who mostly belong to the same community of origin (students and professionals). In doing so, King expresses his convictions about the importance of citizen participation as a tool for social change and of co-ethnic networks in facilitating inclusion.

King: “For example, we offer eh ... services, legal advice, you just got here it’s not ... or whatever, that someone who knows the topic and that is your ... of your own, that understands you, they will better explain the process to you, ‘I want an NIE’, or how to open a bank account, ‘what can I do to get a job?’, how is the... labour market issue here, for example, or perhaps, ‘look, I ... I came here, I stayed illegally, I have been here for two years, three years’, ‘well look,’ you tell him, ‘you qualify for settlement, you must have an employment contract’, and a I don’t know what ... those types of services, counselling is also given if you need it, or even advice on ... how to undertake your own projects, your own way to set up an office, a company that ... options you may have for education after you’ve come here, because there are a number of benefits, etc., etc., etc..

[Associations] ... are particularly important because they primarily put you in contact with, put you in contact with more people or resources, or puts you in touch with ... situations that will enable you to learn more about this or take advantage of that, why? Because you are a person who has just arrived and you need information, you need someone to tell you, here you go to a place to get information and they ... do not ... do not understand you very well, they do not give you all the information you need in a precise form, and whereas if you have a reference point to go to,

where you will be treated kindly, where they know about you, builds confidence and develops a sense of ... of ... you begin to develop a sense of belonging to the society where you've been received, because you've just arrived and you do not have the slightest idea of anything and they say 'well, look, the first thing you have to do would be to learn Catalan.' 'Why do you have to learn Catalan?', 'For this, and this, and this, and this,' 'Where I can go?', 'To this place to do so.'"

E: "Do you think that association membership is a prospect?"

King: "Yes, at least an alternative, at least not to stand idly by, because that would be worse, if there is no alternative, I don't know so much how it works, but it works, this ... This has a very wide reach and that for me it works, slowly, but it works".

King expanded his social networks and participated in voluntary organizations locally, and also across borders, maintaining his ties with the organization in the Dominican Republic that helped him integrate, over the Internet, and served as a nexus with European countries, something which he values as an asset and that would facilitate his eventual return to the Dominican Republic, or possibly living between areas in the future.

"... I started in Santo Domingo, when we started University, I met with a group, I met a group of friends and we formed a joint venture, very ... specific, very interesting, and it's an NGO, and finally we got together, we constitute it formally..."

It's called the 'Community Foundation of Hope and International Justice', an NGO that works on the basis of international relations issues in bringing people closer to better development, further development, rather.

It was also through these networks that he managed to find contracted employment that allowed him to obtain residency after his student visa ran out.

King: "This, through my best friend here, I got a contract with this person, I'll explain the case to you, just as he agreed to a training place, as I'm doing work experience with him in his office, and with that I was able to get the renewal of my NIE [residence

permit] because one after the other, opportunities would appear, to get a job..."

E: "But do you get paid?"

King: "Right now, yes, because at the time the agreement for training, for that, you know? Just based on trust and such but from January on, the man needed someone, and. .. as, I said to him, 'look, as we have this signed and stuff, maybe it would be good for you and work out cheaper and that' ... we did that, I'm doing, working part time with him, it's just a job ..."

In short, it is significant that the support of social networks in varying aspects (approaching the new culture, facilitating access to resources, emotional support, and so forth) and their exercise, as well as the possibility, of citizen participation assisted in King's process of inclusion in the host society.



Image: 'La Pedrera' by Gaudí, one of the places where King takes his visitors.