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Childhoods on the move

Twelve researches on unaccompanied minors in Italy

Andrea Traverso
(Ed.)



Educare

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è il marchio editoriale dell'Università di Genova



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Chapter 3

Unaccompanied adolescents in Tuscany's welcoming system. Flows, characteristics and life stories

Raffaella Biagioli, University of Firenze

3.1 Introduction

The phenomenon of immigration is nowadays considered a founding element of society, and so the complete integration of migrants into the welcoming society has become a fundamental goal. Intercultural education is outlined as the promotion of the capacity to constructively coexist in a varied cultural and social network. This capacity leads to acceptance of, and respect for an other or diverse individual and also to the recognition of his/her cultural identity. Our complex society leads us to face a plurality of individuals, which often becomes an obstacle, rather than a resource. We are afraid of being in contact with diversity, we try in every way to avoid it and to eliminate it, choosing approval rather than a linear thought. This fear is fed by the idea that if we stave off the diverse individuals, it is possible to be safe, and to live sheltered in our reality. The same thought is transmitted to the world population by international politics, which leads citizens to believe that *Human Security* can only be achieved by putting distance between “us” and all those individuals who “threaten” or “attack” the dominant traditions, cultures and identities, and who deconstruct efforts of approval and demonstrate difference. Every human being, influenced by these policies, and by contemporary society, which enhances individualism, personal safety and distrust, firmly starts to doubt that real personal freedom is only obtained if we fight to be equal and to eliminate differences. The situation of unaccompanied minor migrants (UAMs) constitutes a point of particular interest, making them the new protagonists of the migrating processes. The UAM phenomenon is in constant progress; the number of UAMS stated to be on Italian territory at the date of 31st. December 2017 was 18,303. These individuals represent an increment of 5.4%, in comparison with the same period in 2016 (MLPS, 2017).

Also, in data provided by the Reports of the Ministry of Work and Social Policies (MLPS) on 31st. December 2017, some 90.8% of the 18,303 minors appear to be hosted in welcoming structures, while 3.1% appear to be hosted by private individuals while for the remaining 6.1%, as we know from General Direction reports, there are no data available regarding their placement. As we can easily imagine, the Region mostly involved in welcoming

unaccompanied foreign minor migrants, is Sicily, which hosts 43.6% of all those in Italy. Following Sicily, according to MLPS (2017) there is Calabria (7.9%), Lombardy, (6.6%), Emilia Romagna (5.6%), Puglia (5%) and Lazio (5.7%), Sardinia (3.9%), Campania (4.0%) and Tuscany (3.7%).

Often, unaccompanied minors come from lands tormented by war, from poor countries without any resources; they come for survival purposes or to look for new work opportunities, together with a generational restlessness which brings them to experiment new life models. The analysis of the welcoming environment and of migrants' life stories, becomes an essential element to comprehend their features and their social integration modalities.

3.2 The situation in Tuscany

For some years, the Region of Tuscany has set in place the constant monitoring of this phenomenon with the Regional Centre for Childhood and Adolescence Documentation, together with other monitoring systems, which aim to collect information on minors in residential structures and on interventions activated to help these minors, including placing students in school. Monitoring of data, furnishes an interesting picture about the actual attendance and the type of formative school path chosen by unaccompanied foreign minors. UAM presence in welcoming structures is significant and it has experienced a substantial growth in the last few years, even though the residential community is often a place of transition. This happens both because minors reach the legal-age limit, and because the community is often only a step ahead of different stages. UAM stay in welcoming structures exceeds a period of two years only for a minute number, while almost half of them do not stay more than one year. This situation makes their school and professional collocation very complex, since it requires educational structures to adapt not only in terms of language and general competences evaluation, but also in terms of time. Monitoring data coming from residential structures gives an interesting picture about school attendance/non attendance and type of educational path in which UAMs are involved. Doubtless, letting aside the fact that circa a quarter of them is not involved in any educational path, the vast majority is concentrated in middle school, even though some of them should be in different, maybe higher, grades. The low presence of minors in vocational paths, is often due to the necessity to acquire firstly the Italian language and obtain a middle school certificate. Vocational paths also have a longer timeframe than the average amount of time that minors in communities have, as well as a migratory project which entails that they settle in the territorial area. The Regional Centre of Tuscany observes the residential welcoming of minors, thus UAM welcoming, is seen from two privileged observation points, and acquires complementary information. It collects data on minors under the control of the local-area social services and located in social/educational residential structures, through the annual monitoring undertaken by the same services. Moreover, the Centre collects data on Tuscany's residential structure flow (territorial social services are not necessarily in charge of this). Even though a community appears to be welcoming and prone to use all its energies to help the entrusted minors' growth, it is not a normal environment to grow up in. It is not possible to programme the time to become adults and this is not a neglectable feature. This phase represents the period during which operators

try to promote individual identity development, trying to build, together with them, balance between the period of their stay and a future life project, by promoting the development and acquisition of inner confidence and relational skills. The welcoming community, in its different dimensions (family, education and foster home) must represent one of the web-knots of intervention/action/opportunity of growth for a hosted minor. This objective can be reached both by increasing contacts and relations with territorial agencies, and by making them a “landmark” and a place in which they promote and support minors (Istituto degli Innocenti di Firenze, 2012). The survey undertaken in secondary and middle schools in the Tuscany Region in 2015, wanted to uncover educational, biographic and school paths, together with integration and inclusion paths in order to get a better understanding of UAM presence and characteristics. (Biagioli, 2016, pp. 221-248). This research made it possible to know which school paths and in which schools the minors were located, but, above all, it made it possible to analyse the way in which schools and welcoming communities relate to each other and to minors and which resources are implicated in order to face any possible situations. Data collected led us to make operational proposals in order to read better the UAM phenomenon and the possible actions suitable for a path to improve inclusive didactics in secondary schools. Among those proposals, it was possible to speculate about improving work on class-group strategies; improving assessment of starting levels of minors; envisaging a major presence of linguistic/cultural mediators in school; improving literacy workshop-courses for students; envisaging teacher education on citizenship's rights. Some good practices emerged from 5 Institutes (2 middle schools and 3 secondary schools) from areas in Florence, Pisa, Grosseto and Arezzo. Those good practices are related to welcoming protocols translated in different languages, a specific training for teachers, the use of the district's external resources, teamwork practice through cooperative learning methodology. Unsuccessful school paths of UAMs, highlight that school is a place where some of them experiment big or small failures. Those failures tell us about weaknesses of the individuals facing migration, but they are also a mirror of the whole welcoming/social integration system. This mirror's function, together with its systemic perspective, must be well considered when looking at minors, in order not to fall into improper reductionism. Other critical points relate to the fact that these minors are not used to studying, to organizing time for study and to organizing autonomous ways to study. Thus, they need a well prepared path, with gradual steps and calibrated exercises. The major challenge in didactics and organization, is due to disciplinary schedules and lack of school time, variability in starting levels, availability of materials, difficulty in the evaluation of educational/linguistic needs. The need to build adequate mediation tools must be considered important, since the meeting-confrontation is between native students and minority groups from different ethnicities. In this situation, in addition to misunderstandings which normally occur in meetings and communications, we have those due to devaluation and trivialization of minority cultures and to the stereotypes on which these elements are based. It is necessary to put in action an intercultural approach, based on the promotion and comparison of cultures, through the production of new activities and didactic materials. Intercultural education can operate on an affective/representation level, and also on a cognitive/knowledge one, which aim to critically compare and acknowledge identity and differences. Life stories have to be heard, written, read, recommended and collected; those stories could become an extraordinary intercultural opportunity.

3.3 Collection of life stories in second welcoming centres: the interview methodology.

The situation of UAMs is a reason of particular interest, such as to make them the new protagonists of the migrating processes. Foreign UAMs enter into different social contexts, in which, for need or by will, they take on roles and develop relationships. Each context interdependents on the other, which means that the residential community necessarily has to enter into a wider dialogue with different services and interlocutors (that cooperate with each other): diverse social service, school, centre for professional education, health system, companies in which minors do their internship: places where minors do activities, takes on roles and establish relationships; places where relationships exist even between the ones with which minors establish a contact, contexts which are created to interact. Those relationships involve minors directly and indirectly; minors not only influence other individuals in the context in which they act, but are also influenced by other individuals.

As an opportunity for pedagogic reflection on the significance and value of educational interventions, an empiric research was conducted in the context of second welcoming centres. This research used the semi-structured interview as an investigating tool in order to collect life stories about some painful and sometimes traumatic experiences, which have to be heard in a wider context in order to regain trust in a hostile and stigmatizing world. The story collection became an opportunity for pedagogic reflection which, not only gives visibility to a moving generation, but also, permits us to reflect on the significance and value of educational interventions (Biagioli, 2015). In fact, a basic relationship exists between research and narrative thought, since no “important” experience is possible without some element of thought, thus the narrator gives structure to the experience (Mortari, 2007, p. 177-179). The semi-structured interview is characterized by the role of the interviewer. (S)He is free to modify the interview during construction, both regarding content and regarding sequence, as well as possible ways to formulate questions. The interviewer is free to choose the style of conversation that (s)he thinks more appropriate and is free to develop unexpected topics. Since we are talking about a semi-structured interview, the questions developed represent a track which can guide the process, but can even be modified during the interview. This particular type of interview is characterized by its flexibility and adaptability, but it also envisages some open questions, capable of investigating a certain topic, situation or fact as much as possible. Flexibility and adaptability are the main characteristics on which the interviews are based, in order to manage them without constraints and with more freedom within topic choice. The research sample is represented by eight unaccompanied foreign minors aged between 15-17 years old, all of them are males and are hosted by the educational Community of Florence. Four of them are from Albania, two minors are from Kosovo, one minor from Egypt and one minor from Sierra Leone. The minors were asked by educators if they wanted to participate or not in the research and no one declined. During this experience, it was possible to observe that minors from the Balkan region tend to interact more with each other, maybe because they share the same linguistic/cultural background. The minor from Egypt, instead, fit into the whole group and demonstrated to be respected and involved even within the Albanian/Kosovo group, so much that he learnt many words and expressions in their language: for Community educators, it was

amazing seeing him joke in a language so different from his own¹⁸. The minor from the Sub-Saharan region seems less interested in activities and themes which involve the other group of peers.

For what concerns school and education, two Albanian minors attend both the first year of evening classes at middle school, and the first year of vocational school at the Centre for Professional Education (cooking and mechanics); one Albanian minor and one minor from Kosovo attend with fair success the first grade of the Cellini Professional Institute, within a mechanical track; one Albanian minor, who has been in Italy from a long time, is attending the third grade at Istituto Alberghiero Saffi (hotel management school); one Albanian minor is attending the first year of a cooking course at the Professional Education Centre (PEC). The minor from Egypt is attending a coach-builder course at the PEC. The minor from Sierra Leone is attending the third year of middle school and a non formal theater course. The three minors who are studying to be cooks, in addition to curricular practice, are volunteering at the pizzeria Circolo dell'Antella. Educational support is essential to successfully overcome difficulties and issues which can emerge, such as a sense of cultural inferiority, tendency to isolate oneself, insecurity and imbalance in their own life. Building identity in UAMs causes the development of two different spheres of social/cultural values, one for the native country and one for the country of arrival; moreover, there is the constant need to become something else than their own migrating experience. There is a need to feel recognized for what they are and what they will become, not only for their migrating condition. The need to detach from the picture of a migrating and foreign individual is very high, even though they still want to adhere to their own origins. From the interviews, it emerges that all unaccompanied foreign minors come from families with multiple siblings. No one was an only child. Before leaving their country, seven minors out of eight, were living with their mother and father and possibly brothers/sisters. Only the minor from Sierra Leone lived apart from his parents, in an extended family with his grandmother, uncles, aunts and an indefinite number of cousins: more or less thirty people. He says that he has not ever met his father and that he was abandoned by his mother when he was two years old, since she, due to work needs, had to emigrate to Lybia, and left her small son with the grandmother. She came to take him back in 2014, willing to save him from the Ebola epidemic. Then, looking for a better future, they faced the journey to Europe, hoping to reach Germany.

Regarding their decision to leave the country, the minors says that they told their parents first, and got their permission, apart from one of them, who received the proposal to leave directly from his parents and apart from the minor from Sierra Leone, who did not want to leave, but was forced by his mother. The minors talked willingly, maybe because narration permits them to give vent to and express feelings which are often inexpressible, since they are perceived as being negative. Comparison that comes from narration lives in the possibility to externalize the problem, creating a sort of sense of freedom, caused by a symbolic expulsion of inner ghosts. UAMs need to tell about their stories which come from a pain which needs to be reconsidered and, the answer to the question “why did you leave your country?” was always: “because I was hoping for a better life”. In particular, the Albanian minors, added to the answer:

¹⁸ Interview collection was made by Susanna Stagnati, educator at the Centre for Secondary Welcoming. Stagnati completed her graduation thesis with Professor R. Biagioli.

“Because it is well known that Italy offers more than Albania and you can work even as a mechanic or as a cook”. Even the minor from Sierra Leone highlighted the fact that in Sierra Leone, since 2014, there is a disease called ebola and people run away from it.

3.4 Data collection. Voices and witnesses

Narration is the mirror of what we have been and what we are. The individual who talks or writes about his/her past, strives both to comprehend him/herself, and to be comprehended. Through words (s)he commits to paper in a constant exercise by interpreting sequence and meaning of events which occur in his/her experience. Despite the will to improve their economic conditions, it is necessary to consider the individual will of each minor, their emotions and their dreams. They do not leave their country exclusively for the money, but, above all, they do so to pursue their dreams and their wishes in which deep feelings, linked to personal realization, are placed. In this way, we can see a double drive: on one hand, the need to feel useful for their family, and on the other, the wish to realize and affirm themselves.

E.A. Albania:

“In Albania I couldn't finish school, I didn't have money, my family didn't have money, I asked to my cousin, so he came with me, I asked him and he said: here they can help you so you can go to school, you can do anything, anything you want. So I left and everything is going well”.

F.F. Egypt:

“I left because there is no work, no money, my father is ill, he has a broken leg, I have to do something, otherwise it's a bad situation! Leaving my family like this...Honestly I don't like seeing my mum working. Nor my sister. I worked for two years on a cab, but there is no money. There is nothing. Not much...and my siblings want money to keep studying and for my dad, for his medicine. And my mother...of course, for all this!”

S. Kosovo:

“I had a dream. To become like my brother, because even my brother arrived with me. He has been in the community, went to school, everything. Everything went well. I wanted to become like him, so I think I am going with him”.

V.P. Kosovo:

“I left because I wanted a, let's say, brighter future. Because in my country the future wasn't so bright. There is no work there. I came here to find a school and then look for a job”.

V.H. Albania:

“I wanted to change country because I wasn't feeling well in Albania. With the economic situation and everything. I wanted to properly attend a school, a school that I like. I liked to go to a hotel management school, to be a cook. I like to cook. And even to have a better life. Yes, to have a better life. Because Albania is not that rich and economy is everything. Albania is not rich, nor very poor. We are “so so”. We managed until now. I want to help my family”.

F.F. Egypt:

“I want to become something important. For my family, not for any other reason. I will always be something important for my family, but I want to do something for them. This is my dream. This is still my dream”.

E.B. Albania:

“I remember when I was little, when I was ten years old I took my bike and I fixed it on my own. I like it”.

It is interesting to find out if minors went through the journey by themselves or with an adult as reference. The minor from Egypt and two minors from Kosovo left their countries on their own, trusting in adults who were largely paid to do their job. For what concerns the minors from Kosovo, the reference adults were proper passeurs, professionals in crossing borders. The Albanian minors reached Italy together with a relative (two of them with their mothers and one with his grandmother) or with quasi-relatives/friends (one of them trusted a family friend who lived in Italy, another one came with a friend who might be a distant cousin). For what concerns minors of African origin, the journey was full of violence, suffering and loneliness.

F, a minor from Egypt, says that he left his small village by car, together with a man, in order to reach a place in the desert where they stopped for a few days. Then, they got back on the road, until they reached a place and waited to be boarded. Probably, this place was previously used for poultry breeding. F. says he spent three days there with probably 600 people: *even many families, everybody. So many...many Africans, black, very black...*

After three days, he tried for the first time to reach the boats, unsuccessfully. The minor says he has been smashed by a man driving a car and that he cried so much because of the pain. Because he was crying, he was violently beaten by the man who managed the refugee camp: *he beat me. Because I was shouting and crying...he beat me so hard...*

Once arriving at the sea, all migrants were forced to wait for many hours, hidden, in order not to be found by the police. Boarding was through small dinghies which ferry them to the boat.

“We waited for, I guess, three hours because of the police, hidden. After three hours, these tiny tiny boats came. They carry, I guess, 25 or 15 people. I jumped into the water even though I can't swim. A friend saved my life. Thanks to him...”.

Then, he spent 25 days floating on the Mediterranean waves, in a boat which was trying to hide into the emptiness of the sea. His shelter was the boat's hold, where he stayed crouched with 600 people, who were, just like him, waiting for the new land. He suffered hunger and drank dirty water during the whole journey. He arrived in Sicily on a Red Cross ship, where he was offered food, clean water, assistance and blankets:

“Yes, the Red Cross. It was a gigantic boat, really. They fed us, all of us. Blanket for sleeping, they took me to the bus and we went to another place, like a community. They gave me food, they showered me, and the blanket, everything, medicine, everything. They asked me how old are you, what's your name, do you have a family or not...The first thing that I thought was that I wanted to speak with my family because it had been a long time and they thought I was dead”.

F. loves writing about himself, narrating through biographies and poems and, recently, he was awarded within the competition “Tell me, multimedia migrant diaries”, a project supported by the Tuscany Region, which aims to make citizens sensitive to and involve them in themes such as peace, memory and intercultural dialogue. Within this project, F's voice finally found space, hearing and dignity.

The story of A's journey, instead, is quite difficult to follow. It is blurred in terms of places and time lapses. Africa, in fact, is enormous and he reports feeling tiny in the middle of that emptiness.

“My mum took me away and paid the ticket to travel in a Toyota together with a bunch of people. More difficult than the boat to enter...and you stay there, under the people. So many, I don't know what to say, so many. A tiny Toyota with so many people. There were petrol tanks and we were standing on petrol tanks. The Toyota left and a lot of people fell down...and if you fall...goodbye...eh...without water”.

The journey flows in his memories, following the exhausting rhythm of his confusional words, as if those images were still clear in the present:

“They drive from 8 in the morning until midnight. At midnight, they stop and sleep on the ground. In the morning the journey goes on and it is extremely hot and the wind! It burns all your face, it hurts...then, there's no more water to drink the day after Agadez. There was nothing left. There was money, but there is nothing. Then we arrived in a place where there was water. A small place where the animals drank water. Where the camels drank, we drank too and everybody was shouting, fighting and beating each other!”.

They reached Lybia, where they were locked into a refugee camp.

“We arrived in Sabha, Lybia. From that moment on, we stayed in a refugee camp. We have been there for one week. You can't go out. All night long the Arabs were shooting...Eh...Let's say we have been lucky here. The problem is that you can't go out, if you go out they kill you right there. Arabs will kill you...”.

The minor says he slept on the ground for one week and then, one night, both mother and son managed to escape by paying a dealer, so they could reach Tripoli. His mother knows the city well, since she spent many years working there. Thus, before facing the sea, they stayed for one week at the woman's friend's house and, finally, they made it to the boat.

“That boat...believe me...something incredible! Really!!...Migrants escape by night, always by night. There were a lot of people on this boat on the sea. And there, an Arab calls my mum, because they wrote down names of people who paid. They says mum's name and mine, come forward! I was so scared, I didn't want to get in. Anyway, there was no space, really”.

The minor says he got on the boat with approximately 200 people, woman and children:

“Everybody, Muslims, Christians, everybody preyed! They cried a lot...and from there, we arrived at the boat: Italians so many to check our hands. And they were saying: don't worry, there are doctors and policemen. Now I feel good in Casa Sassuolo”.

Everybody feels a big sense of belonging to the Community, which is seen as a source of security and guidance, despite the rules which must be followed. Dreams that minors declare to have right now, correspond to those that led them to leave their countries. This represents quite an important piece of qualitative data, since coherence between before and after, permits us to maintain stable the motivation for their individual life project, preventing that sense of bewilderment, typical of that age. Moreover, it is to be underlined that objectives to reach are, for the major part, linked to the concreteness of life necessities: studying, finding a job, helping the family. Their sensation is to invest a lot of effort in order to reach their goals.

V. H. Albania.

“I feel safe because I am in a community right now. With the educators I feel safe, because I am not on the street”.

F. F. Egypt

“I want to be a good guy. And, another thing, be a mechanic! ”.

V. P. Kosovo

“When I am 18 I want to work and help my family”.

V. S. Kosovo.

“In the future I see myself older and working! ”.

E. B. Albania.

“Slowly, slowly I am learning Italian, I am attending a school to be a mechanic, third class of middle school, everything. I am happy”.

E. A. Albania

“I miss my family, but I am not alone. What I wanted is going where I want it to go. My biggest struggle is that I am not that good with the language”.

A. U. Sierra Leone

“I am more happy being in Italy and in Europe, because in Africa there is nothing. Here in Italy there are so many things to do”.

Minor migrants in their teen years are the ones most at risk, because of the trauma of leaving the place of their origins, but, above all, because they might not always find a good “climate” in Italy. In order to explain the individual tracks of minors, it is necessary to take into consideration various factors, as emerged from the interviews: salary, familiar capital and the relational heritage built. Educational work should not constrain and rethink differences, but it is appropriate to answer their needs so as to be the same considering their need to be listened to, and valued in their diversity (Santerini, Milano 2017, pp. 56, 77).

Using a semi-structured methodology gave them the opportunity to be heard and helped them understand the meaning of their experience. This, also meant conducting a socio-educational research in which the interviewer continuously used his/her eye, ear and attention,

and was capable to penetrate the thematics, not to explain but to understand the sense which they mean to the individual being interviewed, in order to record what (s)he sees through a reflective skill (Milani & Pegoraro 2011, p. 14-15). In this case, narration acquired the method status, since the research was thought of as “experience” and the objective was to comprehend the meaning of the experience.

3.5 Conclusions

UAMs are in the middle of several rule systems. In fact, it is a matter of finding a touch point between needs of protection (which exist because of the migrants' age and are imposed by international childhood conventions) and also, with policies on irregular migration flow control. Among those rules, the international, European and internal norms stand out, and create a juridical web of protection for children and adolescents which are distant, not only from parental care, but also from their native country, aiming to protect them as children and adolescents. Together with these laws, there is a legislation which refers to their condition of extra-EU citizens, such as, migrants asking for asylum, refugees or trade victims. This legislation recognizes its main objective in protecting them and must not leave aside more general protection norms. Thus, minor migrants should firstly be treated as minors, and then as migrants. The professional duty of welcoming centre operators is, firstly, to give information and guide them linguistically. Also, they play an important role when supporting intersubjective relationships, which can enrich the relationship between two people. This is essential, overall, because these minors do not have any adult who can guarantee their protection. Unaccompanied foreign minors represent a social discomfort complaint in our era, that we cannot neglect. Choosing to look away from their needs and to not evolve our understanding towards the value of their rights, is not an admissible educational choice.

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