

## **LEARNING PERFORMANCES OF UNACCOMPANIED FOREIGN MINORS: A CASE STUDY**

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**Abstract.** The reception paths offered for unaccompanied foreign minors (UFMs) in the destination country are fundamental to acquiring the tools to enter the world of work and, more generally, build a new life, particularly the possibility of quickly learning the native language and dedicating oneself profitably to study and training. Starting from this consideration, we investigated the learning paths of the UFMs hosted by the Municipality of Milan. We identified the determinants for their successful performance by acquiring information from the minors and the operators who had them in charge. The analyses showed that staying in the reception pathway and the backgrounds of the UFMs are equally relevant to achieve positive performances. On the one hand, although many UFMs dropped out of the more structured educational pathways (CPIA and school), legal and relational inclusion impact significantly; on the other hand, the origin, the approval or otherwise of the parents to migrate, and the years of study in the country of origin are just as important to have educational results.

### **1. Introduction and theoretical framework**

An unaccompanied foreign minor (UFM), according to the definition in the Recast Qualification Directive 2011/95/EU by the European Union, is a “minor who arrives on the territory of an EU Member unaccompanied by the adult responsible for him/her by law [...] or who is left unaccompanied after he/she has entered the territory of the EU Member State”<sup>1</sup>. UFMs are considered among the potentially most vulnerable migrants (Morgano, 2020). They are vulnerable as minors, and as foreigners, and because their parents do not accompany them during dangerous and complex journeys, characterized by exposure to high risks regarding safety and psycho-physical integrity. Moreover, they are forced to imagine their future in a country whose language they do not yet know, far from their own place of origin, and without the support of an attachment context that can compensate for

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<sup>1</sup> <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2011:337:0009:0026:en:PDF>

these fragilities (Accorinti, 2014; Foschino Barbaro and Sgaramella, 2021). To the initial vulnerability is added a complex condition determined by their status, which places them at the crossroads of multiple juridical affiliations: minors, foreigners, possibly asylum seekers, and often victims of trafficking.

Some research has shifted attention from vulnerabilities to the resilience characteristics that distinguish UFM: many have chosen to undertake migration to help their families redeem themselves financially or have often been able to overcome independently the problematic experience of the journey, putting in place autonomy and determination (Accorinti, 2016; Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö, 2016).

Generally speaking, the complex system of factors underlying international migration becomes even more intricate in the case of UFM: for example, the family can play a preponderant or marginal role if not present, or may even be harmful if it represents a main factor driving individuals to flee (Accorinti and Vitiello, 2017).

Furthermore, the UFM's migration projects may differ significantly from each other. Their circumstances are unstable and constantly evolving, requiring local institutions to provide personalized attention to individual cases to determine which reception practices best protect their interests (Accorinti, 2014; IOM, 2018).

Law 47/2017<sup>2</sup> provides Italy with an advanced regulatory framework for the recognition of the rights of UFM and their protection (Fondazione Ismu, 2019). In Italy, as well as in the rest of the European Union, UFM are foreigners with citizenship from outside the EU, who are, for whatever reason, on national territory without legal assistance or representation (Pavesi, 2020). Furthermore, this law reaffirms the absolute principle of non-refoulement, introduces the role of the voluntary guardian, and makes provisions to facilitate the realization of UFM's right to education and health. Of particular importance is art. 13, which outlines the possibility for the Juvenile Court to entrust a young adult to social services to allow that individual to complete the social integration courses already started, up to the twenty-first year of age.

Risk and resilience factors function differently depending on the contexts in which UFM find themselves (Aleghfeli and Hunt, 2022). Furthermore, different studies show the importance of keeping UFM in the reception circuit, since the phenomenon of their "untraceable" is relevant (Unicef, 2017; Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, 2022).

From this point of view, the reception paths offered to UFM in the destination country are fundamental, particularly the possibility of quickly learning the native

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<sup>2</sup> Provisions on protection measures for unaccompanied foreign minors.

[http://www.prefettura.it/FILES/AllegatiPag/1162/LEGGE\\_7\\_aprile\\_2017\\_n\\_47.pdf](http://www.prefettura.it/FILES/AllegatiPag/1162/LEGGE_7_aprile_2017_n_47.pdf)

language and dedicating oneself profitably to study and training. Entering school may represent an excellent opportunity to process the traumas caused by migration and acquire stimuli and motivation to build a new life project gradually (Biagioli, 2015). Therefore, school plays a strategic role being the primary integration tool, together with professional training. Italian is learned at school, students can work on social integration, and it is through school and professional training that one acquires the necessary skills for subsequent job placement (Pavesi, 2020; Santagati and Barzaghi, 2021). In offering the tools of speech and knowledge, school supports the minor in self-discovery and the placement of his or her history and path within a broader socio-cultural horizon (Augelli *et al.*, 2020).

Identifying risk and resilience factors in educational pathways is necessary to guide reception policies aimed at UFM, whose characteristics are increasingly changing and heterogeneous (Aleghfeli and Hunt, 2022). As the law on the rights and protection of UFM has advanced, the same can be said for the Italian legislation which regulates foreign minors' right to education: all foreign minors, even if without a residence permit, have the right to be enrolled in school (of all types and levels, not just compulsory school). The enrolment of foreign minors takes place in the same manner and under the conditions provided for Italian minors and can be requested at any time of year (Accorinti, 2014). Alongside compulsory schooling and their rights and duty to education, UFM regardless of legal status have access to professional training courses. The legislation on the right and duty to education and professional training stipulates compulsory education for ten years; compulsory education continues up to the age of 18, and is fulfilled by obtaining a secondary school diploma, or a professional qualification lasting at least three years, or enrolling in an apprenticeship. Indeed, various surveys show that with the prolongation of reception, the involvement of minors in the education and training system becomes almost universal (Santagati and Barzaghi, 2021).

It should be kept in mind that many UFM should be enrolled old for their grade, having yet to complete compulsory schooling. However, they are more easily placed in the CPIA<sup>3</sup> in the context of initial literacy courses. In some cases, they are only later included in the scholastic path of the lower secondary school

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<sup>3</sup> CPIA stands for "Centro Provinciale per l'Istruzione degli Adulti" ("Provincial Center for Adult Education"). At the CPIA, it is possible to obtain: the final certificate of the first cycle of education (equivalent to completing middle school), a certification of fulfilment of compulsory education, and a certification of knowledge of the Italian language at level A2 of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages developed by the Council of Europe. Specifically, regarding enrolment in CPIAs, established by DPR 263/12, the regulations stipulate the enrolment requirements for minors who have reached the age of sixteen and do not possess the final certificate of the first cycle of education. In exceptional cases, motivated by specific needs, individuals who have reached the age of fifteen may be admitted (Article 3, DPR No. 263/12).

within the CPIA. The CPIA is a strong point of reference because it offers structured courses and UFM's perceive it as a real school, with the possibility of certification and creating a course of study more suitable for the individual's needs (Augelli, 2020).

Another important element is that the reasons underlying migration vary according to the country of origin, with a substantial impact on the reception pathways in the host country (Santagati and Barzaghi, 2021) and on different propensities to abandon these pathways (Unicef, 2017).

Furthermore, some research has shown how overcoming the difficulties connected to migration (which may include leaving the country of origin in conflict with one's parents) selects a more motivated group of migrants capable of going beyond difficulties and who have considerable decision-making capacity (Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö, 2016; Augelli *et al.*, 2018).

The networks created in the host country are equally crucial. The more that adolescents create their own networks and peer contacts, the greater opportunities they have of achieving positive pathways for successful social inclusion (Augelli *et al.*, 2018; Fondazione Ismu, 2019). Furthermore, the possibility of good social inclusion is also linked to the possibility for UFM's to gain experience outside their host communities through performance in sports, cultural, and social activities envisaged in an individualized educational program (Augelli *et al.*, 2020).

Finally, it should be kept in mind that slow and complex procedures for obtaining a residence permit in the host country are a fundamental obstacle to supporting UFM's and their transition to adulthood (Fondazione Ismu, 2019).

Through the case study of UFM's hosted by the Municipality of Milan, we studied their learning paths, and we identified the determinants for their successful performance based on the prevailing evidence in the recent literature cited above.

## **2. Data and methods**

### *2.1. Data*

We used data from a survey collected for a project carried out by the Municipality of Milan and the Department of Statistics and Quantitative Methods (DISMEQ) of the University of Milan Bicocca. The project aimed to investigate the UFM's hosted by the Municipality of Milan on 31 December 2021 collecting information about their socio-demographic backgrounds, the characteristics of their travel to arrive in Italy, hosting conditions, future projects, and operator ratings. In addition, detailed data on education and training pathways were collected to allow a more comprehensive analysis of how UFM's get involved. This allows a better

definition/description which, if based only on data from institutional sources, is partial, incomplete, and fragmented (Santagati and Barzaghi, 2021).

Therefore, the survey's target population consisted of unaccompanied foreign minors and young adults (henceforth generically UFM) who were guests with the Municipality of Milan on 31 December 2021. The survey tool was a standardized quantitative questionnaire shared by the 'Policies Unit for Inclusion and Immigration' of the Municipality of Milan and the DISMEQ.

After a pre-test in four communities in December 2021, three training days were organized for the operators who would be responsible for carrying out the survey, involving all the organizations that have UFM under their care in partnership with the Municipality of Milan.

The operators of the reception units then administered the questionnaire in January and February 2022. The survey phase effectively ended on 28 February, and 96 reception units (including reception centres, educational communities, and apartments) were surveyed within the 25 out of 26 institutions participating in the survey, which in total housed 598 UFM. The number of guests extracted from the Municipality of Milan database on the same date was 648 units, excluding 59 guests of the institution that declined to participate in the survey. The lower number of cases in the survey in comparison with the municipal data is due to the need to update the latter, which at the time of the extraction included guests who had left some time previously.

In the end, 566 valid questionnaires were collected, representing 86% of the total UFM. Except for one, the responses contained data for all the institutions that hosted UFM on 31 December 2021 in agreement with the Municipality of Milan and all UFM who were hosted on that precise date. The survey, therefore, takes on the characteristics of a census.

The survey that was conducted has a complexity deriving from the fact that it is intended both for the UFM themselves and for operators; UFM were interviewed to identify the reasons underlying their migration choices and future intentions, and operators were called upon to complete assessments in several areas relating to the UFM's reception process, and to provide objective data on the courses undertaken and the characteristics of their assigned UFM.

## *2.2. Methods and variables*

The outcome variable was "educational performances", derived from two questions available in the questionnaire. The first question assessed whether a level

of Italian language proficiency equal to A2<sup>4</sup> had been reached. The second question identified those who had not started or had stopped attending school or a CPIA or training course. Therefore, the outcome variable assumed a value of 0 if an Italian language level equal to A2 had not been achieved, or if attendance in a school/CPIA/training course had not been started or had been interrupted. Otherwise, the variable assumed the value 1 (reached an Italian language level equal to A2, and school attendance or a CPIA or training course was not interrupted).

The dependent variable considered the essential elements contributing to educational failure: difficulties related to understanding the Italian language, inconstancy in school attendance, and students' failure to achieve classroom goals (Biagioli, 2015). Furthermore, the A2 level was chosen because the CPIA requires this level for minors to be placed in lower secondary school courses, as it is considered fundamental learning the language to enable study (Augelli, 2020).

We used five main explanatory variables based on the prevailing evidence emerging in the literature: 'Citizenship': Egypt (reference), Albania, Tunisia, Bangladesh, or other countries; 'Years of study in the country of origin'; 'Total parental agreement with migration': no (reference), yes; 'Italian friends': no (reference), yes; 'Operator assessment of participation in recreational activities': scale from 1 (minimum) to 5 (maximum). Furthermore, we used the following control variables: 'Residence permit': no (reference), yes; 'duration of stay', measured as the months spent in Italy.

We performed descriptive statistical analysis to show the main characteristics of UFM in the case study, and we applied a logistic regression model to test the roles of covariates mentioned above.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Descriptive results

*Structural features.* As can be seen from Table 1, almost all of the guests are male (97.2%). the most prevalent citizenship is Egyptian (43.8%), followed by Albanian (15.4%) and Tunisian (11.8%). The predominance of Egyptians reflects the flows of Egyptian UFM who have Milan as their destination, due to a consolidated migratory chain that makes Egypt the most populous migrant

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<sup>4</sup> The level of Italian detected in the survey is expressed in the six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages developed by the Council of Europe (CEFR) scale. <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>

community among Milan residents<sup>5</sup>. The share of 18-21-year-olds is substantial (34.2%), highlighting how the reception pathways follow the UFM's beyond the minor age. On the other hand, the proportion of those who have arrived in Italy for at least two years is lower (21.3%) because a significant portion of UFM's is 17 years old upon arrival. Finally, less than a third studied for 9-13 years in the country of origin and a high share (43.2) came from rural areas.

**Table 1** – UFM's' citizenship and associated characteristics (%), 31 December 2021.

Citizenship	%	male	18-21 years old	From rural areas	9-13 years of schooling in the country of origin	Very low-income family	≥2 years migratory duration
Egypt	43.8	99.6	29.4	50.6	28.0	16.9	8.5
Albania	15.4	97.7	39.1	34.9	64.7	4.7	46.5
Tunisia	11.8	100.0	26.9	25.4	24.2	7.5	16.9
Bangladesh	9.7	100.0	29.1	51.9	3.7	29.1	5.9
Pakistan	5.1	100.0	44.8	62.1	20.7	20.7	24.1
Other countries	14.2	83.5	49.4	30.8	36.8	17.9	47.8
Total	100.0	97.2	34.3	43.2	31.8	15.4	21.3

Source: elaboration on survey UFM's Milan Municipality

The communities have specific traits: Albanians and Bengalis are represented by opposing statistics. The former community has the highest education levels (64.7% studied in their country of origin for at least nine years), the lowest percentage of very low-income families (4.7%), and the longest migratory history (46.5% present in Italy for two or more years). On the contrary, the latter community has the lowest level of education (only 3.7% reach nine years of schooling), the highest incidence of very low-income families (29.1%), and the most recent migratory history (only 5.9 % have been present for two or more years). Among the other more numerous communities, Tunisians have characteristics similar to Albanians (few come from very low-income families or rural areas). In contrast, the Egyptian and Pakistani communities have traits in common with the Bengalis (with an above-average incidence of very poor and those from rural areas). Moreover, Pakistanis notably have the highest percentage of 18-21-year-olds (44.8%), just as the group of UFM's from other countries (49.4%). In contrast, Egyptians have a comparatively more recent migratory history (only 8.5% have been in Italy for two or more years).

*Knowledge of the Italian language and school dropout.* Upon entry to reception, knowledge of the Italian language is largely deficient. Improvement in Italian can

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. <http://sisi.comune.milano.it/> The statistical computing platform of the Municipality of Milan.

be appreciated by stratifying the guests by the duration of their reception in agreement with the Municipality of Milan (Table 2): the share of Pre A1s is inversely linked with the duration they have been in reception (reaching zero among those present for over two years); conversely, level B1 becomes consistent among those who have been hosted for more than six months, and level B2 among those who have been guests for over a year, being the most frequent level among those who entered over two years ago (40%). Among the UFM guests who have been present for the longest time, the Albanian community, on average more educated and inclined to learn Italian, is the largest. Therefore, the effect of migration duration is partly attributable to changes over time in the characteristics of flows.

**Table 2** – Percentages of UFM guests by Italian level and by attended courses, stratified by duration since first entry in agreement with the Municipality of Milan.

Italian level	First entry	Duration since first entry (in months)				
		0-3	4-6	7-12	13-24	> 24
Pre A1	88.2	40.2	29.1	9.5	7.0	0.0
A1	9.1	47.8	54.7	39.3	30.3	8.0
A2	2.0	8.7	14.5	39.3	34.5	21.0
B1	0.5	3.3	1.7	11.9	18.3	31.0
B2 or more	0.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.9	40.0
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
<b>Attendance</b>						
Italian course	-	84.8	91.5	97.6	95.8	95.0
CPIA	-	42.4	61.0	72.6	74.1	81.0
Primary or	-	12.6	14.7	15.7	18.0	49.0
Professional	-	1.1	4.3	16.9	28.2	47.5

Source: elaboration on survey UFM guests Milan Municipality

Among the education and training opportunities offered to UFM guests during their reception, in addition to Italian courses, there are CPIAs, primary or secondary school/CFP<sup>6</sup>, and training courses (Table 2). After the Italian courses, which are attended by almost all the UFM guests, the CPIAs receive the highest number of enrolments (about two out of three UFM guests). School (primary or secondary) and the training courses attracted the participation of around one in five UFM guests. By stratifying attendance by duration of reception, it can be observed that participation in education and training increases among the UFM guests present for the longest time. Attendance of at least one Italian course exceeded 90% among guests who had been present for over three months. For CPIA, schools, and training courses, attendance rate increased gradually with the duration since the first entry: it

<sup>6</sup> CFP stands for Centro di Formazione Professionale, an institution that provides vocational training to prepare individuals for entering the labour market.



exceeded 80% for CPIA, approaching 50% for schools and training courses among guests received for over two years.

Based on the survey data, the incidence of leaving school or training early can be estimated. Interruptions in attendance affected 5.5% of those attending Italian courses and 10.9% of those enrolled in a training course. The drop-out rate among UFM's enrolled in a CPIA and school is much more relevant (34.8% and 32.5%, respectively; Table 3) compared to that of Italian courses and training.

**Table 3** – Percentages of UFM's who, having completed an Italian course, CPIA, school (primary or secondary), or a training course, obtained a certification/diploma or dropped-out.

	Italian course	CPIA	Primary or secondary school	Professional training course
drop-out	5.5	34.8	32.5	10.9
certificate/diploma	94.5	65.2	67.5	89.1

Source: elaboration on survey UFM's Milan Municipality

### 3.2. Results of the multivariate model

Net of the other variables, citizenship of origin is a significant characteristic that produces differences in UFM's' educational performance (Table 4). Among the citizenships considered, Egyptians and Bengalis are the communities with the least effective performances. In particular, compared with the Egyptian reference community, Albanians and Tunisians are more than three times as likely to have achieved an Italian level at least equal to A2 and not to have dropped out of school/training. Since the Egyptian community has a strong presence in Milan, the difficulties identified among UFM's of this origin are presumably not linked to the intention of leaving Italy. The lower propensity to engage in reception pathways may depend on being able to rely on the support of the community of origin in employment integration. Furthermore, the dichotomy of Albania vs Bangladesh as extremes of more and less education is confirmed by previous surveys (Santagati and Barzaghi, 2021). In the same way, school background has a statistically significant effect on "educational performances"; each additional year of study in the country of origin increases the probability of achieving an Italian level of at least A2 and not dropping out of school/training.

Furthermore, regarding relationships, although with weak statistical significance, we found performance to be better among those who migrated without parental consent. Likewise resulting in literature, this suggests greater motivation for migration, favouring a stronger commitment to learning the Italian

language and attending school/training courses. On the other hand, social relationships with Italians are associated with better linguistic and educational performance, confirming the positive role of relationships with natives.

Another quantitative variable that has a positive and significant effect on linguistic and school/training performance is the operators' assessment of participation in recreational activities. In this case, the positive involvement of UFM in recreational activities can therefore be interpreted as a socializing tool that facilitates and promotes educational and training success.

**Table 4** - *Logistic regression –Odds ratios and significance. Outcome variable “Educational performances”.*

	Exp(B)	Sign.
Citizenship (ref. Egypt)		0.040
Albania	4.270	0.016
Tunisia	3.728	0.022
Bangladesh	2.754	0.110
Other Countries	1.902	0.182
Years of study in the country of origin	1.228	0.004
Total parental agreement with migration (ref. No)	0.512	0.070
Italian friends (ref. No)	1.929	0.073
Operator assessment of participation in recreational activities	1.450	0.034
Residence permit (ref. No)	3.337	0.020
Duration of stay (in months)	1.041	0.006
Constant	0.017	0.000

Source: elaboration on survey UFM Milan Municipality

Regarding control variables, first staying in Italy also has a positive effect. That is not a foregone conclusion; it is true that those who have been in the country for longer have had more time to improve their Italian, but also for their studies/training to be interrupted. Probably on the basis of the identified link, we can trace the selection effect of UFM who, if they have remained in reception for longer, have shown greater determination to continue their reception paths by making use of training courses. Meanwhile, other UFM, that are not observable in the survey, have interrupted their reception path because they do not intend to stay in Italy and/or lack interest in the education and training paths made available by the Municipality of Milan. This association, therefore, demonstrates the importance of keeping UFM in the reception circuit.

Secondly, obtaining a residence permit is an "accessory" element that appears to be very relevant. The UFM that have a permit achieve better educational performance, net of other variables. It is plausible that obtaining a valid residence permit offers UFM greater awareness and peace of mind for the positive continuation of their reception process.

#### 4. Conclusions

A preliminary element that should be underlined is that gathering multiple data, including that from prior to migration, helps to improve a broad understanding of the phenomenon, overcoming the shortcomings of many previous UFM studies based on limited sets of variables. From this point of view, the case study of Milan, analysed through a questionnaire addressed to both UFMS and operators who deal with these minors, reveals the relevance of factors that cannot be deduced from mere administrative data.

Specifically, the case study conducted on UFM's hosted by the Municipality of Milan shows how the integration process, which requires knowledge of the Italian language and attendance at school and training courses, is closely connected to legal and relational inclusion. Although many UFM's dropped out of the more structured educational pathways (CPIA and school), those who persisted in the overall program achieved positive performances.

Finally, staying in the reception pathway and the backgrounds of the UFM's are equally relevant. The latter aspect is evident from the results; in fact, the educational performances differ to the origin, the approval or otherwise of the parents to migrate, or concerning the years of study in the country of origin.

The study's findings contribute to a better understanding of UFM's' educational outcomes and can inform policies and interventions to improve their learning performances.

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