

WHEN "AT THEIR HOME"¹ ALSO MEANS "AT OUR HOME": SURVEY ON THE QUALITY OF THE RECEPTION OF UNACCOMPANIED FOREIGN MINORS IN ITALY

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1. Premise

The Italian reception system for UASCs (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors) provides for a widespread network of structures throughout the country and intervention programs that accompany these minors until they become of age. However, there is no set path which takes into consideration their needs and wants to help them make the “leap” into adulthood. A research was thus carried out to explore the needs of UASCs who are about to leave the facilities to move to the adult reception system, using a questionnaire divided into six survey areas regarding the well-being of children, their experiences of the welcome reception they received and their plans for the future. The information collected is useful for social workers to support and help minors on their onward path from the reception phase.

2. Unaccompanied Foreign Minors in Italy

In our legal system the most complete normative source is the law n. 47/2017, called "Zampa Law"², which together with the Directive 2013/33 / EU of the European Parliament³, defines Unaccompanied Foreign Minor (UASC) as “a minor who does not have Italian or other EU citizenship, has not applied for asylum and is, for any reason, within the territory of the State without care or representation by

¹ *A casa loro (at their home)*, as the original title in Italian predicted, refers to a slogan from years ago of a political campaign of controversy against the immigration process in Italy.

² Law 7 April 2017, n. 47 Provisions regarding the protection measures for unaccompanied foreign minors.

³ Directive 2013/33/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 26 June 2013 laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection.

their parents or other adults who are legally responsible for them under existing Italian laws⁴.

The main reasons why minors leave their country are attributable to economic factors and / or to reunite with their family or friends (Pandolfi, 2020), for security reasons (Traverso, 2018), or social hardship. They may also be fleeing situations where they are victims of trafficking or child exploitation channels (Bertozzi, 2005; Attanasio, 2016).

In Italy, as of November 30, 2021, it was calculated that there are 11,159 unaccompanied foreign minors within Italian territory. 97.3% of them are Male. The following age distribution was recorded: 62.9% were 17 years old, 23.7% were 16 years old, 8.1% were 15 years old, 5.3% were 14 or below. The main countries of origin were: Bangladesh (24.8%), Tunisia (14.4%), Egypt (13.9%) and Albania (10.5%) (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2021).

These minors undergo the migration experience mostly by themselves. In most cases they are close to the age of being legally adults so they have little time available to achieve social integration, personal, economic and housing autonomy (Pandolfi, 2020). When minors move away from their country, and therefore from their family, from the social and cultural context, they find themselves in a state of potential vulnerability and fragility (Zannoni, 2020). There are many sources of uncertainty and disorientation; consider simply the difficulties that they may encounter during a career path as well as the difficulties in reconciling their own culture with ours (Fichera and Pitzalis, 2019).

Whatever the motivation to abandon their homeland, they leave behind many certainties: culture, habits, family, and other ties. These changes cause confusion to these minors and their perception of themselves and their identity is undermined, making this period they live in very delicate (Biagioli, 2016). Added to these is the fact that children also find themselves facing their adolescence which is "the age of conflicts and strong personal experimentation, of the incessant fluctuation between the search for independence and the need for certain references" (Zannoni, 2020, p. 30). UASCs must look for these references in a social, cultural and linguistic reality different from their own, and must find their own identity in a society that is not always willing to welcome them (Favaro and Napoli, 2016). The foreign minor is therefore faced with a double detachment: from his/her homeland and from everything he/she has always considered to be "home", and subsequently the

⁴ Operational Vademecum for taking charge and welcoming unaccompanied foreign minors, prepared by the Ministry of the Interior (Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration), with the support of the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), and the collaboration of the Department of Public Security, Central Service of the Reception and Integration System (SAI), Ministry of Labor and Social Policies (Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policies), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and International Organization for Migration (IOM).

abstract detachment from a perception of him(her) self going through the period of greater change (Crotti and Meregalli, 2017).

In the light of these reflections, it appears important that welcoming of minors is oriented towards their well-being, so that they can feel they are in a positive situation of security, support and emotional, mental and social balance.

3. Research objectives, tool and method

The initial objective of this research was to investigate the perception of the quality of hospitality by UASC from those present on the Italian territory, through the administration of a questionnaire structured in six general areas aimed at verifying the research hypotheses, namely: nostalgia for one's country (in terms of family ties and cultural aspects), a low degree of integration and training in favour of clear expectations about one's work plans, little availability of opportunities for socialization, a high perception of prejudice and minimal levels of acceptance, dissatisfaction with one's experience of staying in Italy (including life at the reception facility and appreciation for the territory), absence of optimism and hope and conviction regarding the career to be undertaken after leaving the circuit of hospitality.

In the final version, the questionnaire consisted of 32 structured questions with different response methods and with simple language, to avoid misunderstandings.

The questionnaire administration took place between May 24th and September 10th 2021. 57 facilities distributed throughout the country were contacted to ask for their collaboration in administering the questionnaire available online to the minors. 12 structures (equal to 21.1%) collaborated with a total of 95 completed questionnaires (anonymously) on the Google Forms platform. It is assumed that the low percentage of adhesion by the structures is due to the summer period of the research (social operators on vacation) and to the priority of the management of the pandemic between users and staff. Finally, it should be noted that the linguistic difficulties encountered by the children sometimes made the answers inconsistent or difficult to interpret.

Given the methods of selecting the sample and the aims of the research, there is no probabilistic sample; therefore the results of the research cannot be the object of inference for purposes of generalization, but they have provided useful information for the theoretical awareness of what should be the most appropriate educational interventions.

4. Data analysis and hypothesis testing

All respondents are male, 75.8% have been in Italy for a maximum of one year and 50.5% turned 18 in 2021. 49.5% of the sample comes from Bangladesh, 20.0% from Albania and 13.7% from Pakistan, while the remaining 16.9% comes from Kosovo, Afghanistan, Egypt, Gambia, Tunisia, Ivory Coast and Mali. Given the small size of the sample, it was not possible to construct significant profiles by country of origin.

4.1 *Nostalgia for one's own country*

As was to be expected, nostalgia for their country of origin is very high (71.6% between "a lot of nostalgia" and "so much nostalgia"), however 15.8% do not have this type of feeling. Even stronger is the nostalgia for their own family ("a lot" and "a lot") for 89.5% of the children, but there is no relationship between the level of nostalgia and the length of stay in Italy of the children⁵.

As Zannoni points out (2020, p. 26) it is necessary to remember that "even after months or years in Italy, suffering persists and on the one hand feeds the experiences of loss, nostalgia and lack for the places and people left behind, by another is the torment for still not feeling integrated".

4.2 *Integration and training*

The reception system of UASCs has training programs that include the study of the Italian language. The study of the language is a right, a key to understand the new social context and to communicate with the educators and a tool for social and work integration. It also promotes the achievement of autonomy (Save the Children 2017). 77.9% of young people share the interest to learn Italian language for reasons related to the possibility of finding a job (tab. 1).

⁵ In order to determine the statistical significance of each different experience of homesickness for one's own family and towards one's own country a statistical test has been conducted to provide evidence. The χ^2 test, with $\alpha = 0.05$, was related to the length of stay of UASCs in Italy. In the subsequent analysis of the data subjected to the χ^2 test, only the values of the tests that are significant will be reported together with the corresponding critical values (for the χ^2 tests, see Ian Diamond and Julie Jefferies, 2006).

Table 1 – *Pleasure in studying the Italian language (percentage values)*

	%
Yes, because it allows me to work	77,9
Yes, because I understand Italians when they speak	45,3
Yes, because it has a nice sound	36,8
Yes, because it's easy	36,8
Yes, because I can read without difficulty	17,9
I haven't started yet	4,2
No, because it is difficult to speak	2,1
No, because it is difficult to write it	1,1

Literacy, training and apprenticeship are necessary tools to achieve one's autonomy, to reduce feelings of anxiety and fear for the future once the period of stay at the reception facilities has ended. At the time of the research, only 4.2% of respondents were engaged in any work activity.

By using a network of friends as an indicator of integration, we discover that 60.0% of these young people have no Italian friends, and this data can be correlated with the length of stay in Italy (Test of $\chi^2 = 16.767$, value critical = 9.488): the boys who have been in Italy for the longest time are those who have the most Italian friends. Friendships with non-Italian children are more widespread: 93.7% of the interviewees have friends from other countries.

4.3 Available opportunities for socialization

To understand the quality of relationships between UASCs and peers, the physical attendance of friends was used as an indicator: some see each other every day (8.4%), 15.8% only at weekends and most (72.6%), a few days during the week. The most intense relationship which is maintained (or replaced) with friends and family is through the use of the smartphone: 58.9% of young people use it every day and 32.6% "sometimes" a week. Only 5.3% communicate only on weekends (but we do not know if this is a free choice or an organizational need for the interlocutor too). Finally, 3.2% never use it.

When it comes to physical meetings and participation in events (concerts, parties ...) in their own city or in Italy in general, the percentages drop, showing that 74.7% of the sample has never, or almost never, taken part in such initiatives. The reasons for this low participation are not known, and comparing the data on participation in local events and the stay in Italy of minors, there are no differences in behaviour based on the duration of their presence in our country.

4.4 Prejudice, acceptance and opinions regarding one's experience in Italy

Tackling the issue of social inclusion means not only counting the number of friends or contacts, but also looking at the psychological experience of young people in relation to the welcoming community. A positive picture of acceptance emerges as 65.3% of UASC perceive that they receive great kindness from the Italians and only 5.3% define omit them as “little” or “not at all” kind. A further indicator of acceptance is the awareness of feeling cheated. Overall, 83.2% of young people do not feel teased by either Italians or non-Italians and only 1 boy (1.1%) feels that they is being targeted by "almost all"; the remaining percentage is divided between those who feel laughed at only by some non-Italians (5.3%) and those who feel laughed at only by some Italians (4.2%) and 6.3% who feel mocked by everyone.

In general, the minors live their Italian experience positively, while dissatisfaction with the welcoming structures is more evident. 64.2% express their experiences in very positive terms, both in relation to the structures and to the country (they are "very" or "indeed very happy"), while 7.4% are “quite” “very” happy, or "extremely" happy to live in Italy but "rather" or "not at all" happy in the specific structure, probably because the reception is perceived as inadequate.

We chose an iconic technique to understand the emotional response of the children towards their own experience as immigrants; the technique was ideal to represent moods without the mediation of words, with the insertion of four images in the questionnaire, two referring to the mood of the minors at the present time (loneliness and solidarity), and two to describe their experience as immigrants in Italy (object of discrimination and inclusion), visible in table 2. 85.3% of the minors in both cases chose images with a more inclusive meaning: this suggests that the experience in Italy includes few episodes of prejudice or discrimination or (ideally) none and that at the time of compilation, the minors were going through a good phase of their life. On the other hand, there is 2.1% of young people (equal to two young people) who feel isolated. 12 respondents, however, (12.6%), although most had a positively defined experience in Italy, felt loneliness at the time of compilation.

Hypothesizing whether the moods and attitudes detected were attributable to the length of stay in Italy, we proceeded with a comparison between the two variables, to discover that there is no significant relationship between them.

Table 2 – Evaluation of the perception of one's current state of mind and referring to the immigration experience in Italy.





Which image describes your experience?	Which picture describes how you are doing?		Total
			
	2	2	4
	10	81	91
Totale	12	83	95

Image source: Google Images

4.5 Optimism, hope and future plans

The well-being of minors can be assessed not only with reference to the social / relational sphere, but also by investigating future projects. 96.9% of the interviewees declared that they want to stay in Italy for various reasons referable to economic factors (87.4% hope to find a job while 5.3% have already found it), linked to reception (“I’m happy” 52.6%, “Italy is a welcoming country” 32.6%, “I found friends” 23.2%) and safety (43.2%).

The young people who hope to find a job are mostly oriented towards the professions they learn in the vocational courses they have attended. 24.2% largely concern the catering sector (waiter, kitchen help, cook, pizza maker, restaurant help), 10.5% are related to construction (drywall installer, bricklayer, welder) while other trades amount to 21.4% (electrician, plumber, mechanic, barber, carpenter, worker, cleaner). The percentage of undecided people who do not have clear ideas is high (37.3%) while 7.4% said they had never thought about it yet at the time of the interview. The desire to stay in Italy is accompanied by the hope that, once they leave the welcoming community, there will be someone to help them find a job (80.0%) and a house (67.4%). Another significant data is the desire to stay in touch with their educator (45.3%) and with the minors of the community (29.5%), to continue to see their friends (24.2%) and, in general, to have support, presumably psychological and relational (21.1%). Other types of responses that were chosen in a lower percentage are: finding another reception facility (8.4%), moving to another country (4.2%), helping minors who are in the community (1.1%), continue studying (1.1%). Young foreigners have clear ideas about projects for

their future which can be traced back to various categories: 1) well-being of their family, 2) purchase of material goods, 3) sentimental and emotional relationships and plans to form a family, 4) social commitment and 5) self-realization (tab. 3).

Table 3 – *Wishes for one's future (percentage values).*

	%		%
<i>1) Well-being of one's family</i>			
Saving up for my family	64,2	Living with your partner	28,4
Bring the family to Italy	61,1	Living with friends	25,3
<i>2) Purchase of material goods</i>			
Buy a car	60,0	Living on my own	10,5
Save up for myself	53,7	<i>4) Social commitment</i>	
Buying a house	53,7	Promoting the integration of immigrants	39,0
Buy a cellphone	27,4	Helping other foreign youths	34,7
<i>3) Affective relationships and projects</i>			
Getting married	52,6	Do volunteering work	27,4
Find a partner	42,1	<i>5) Self-realization</i>	
Having children	41,1	Travelling	43,2
		Continue studying	26,3
		Investing	1,1

Perceived fears reconfirm how important work and housing solutions are after they leave the reception circuit (tab. 4).

The third fear these minors experience is that of losing their residence permit (45.3%) due to obstacles or bureaucratic quibbles; this in fact is more worrying than surprising. The issue of money to be sent to the family of origin also covers an important position. The "not knowing where to go" and "feeling lonely" are two fears that demonstrate the need to feel the support from the reception environment, reinforced by the fear of "getting no more help from this facility".

The overall view that can be taken from reading the data that emerged, allows us to understand how well-structured and complex the educational intervention is within the UASC. Examining the information obtained allows us to measure the responsibility of the educator in being a valid guide in the growth of these minors.

Table 4 – *Fears about one's future (percentage values)*

	%		%
<i>1) Financial fear</i>		Not being able to go anywhere else	6,3
Failing to find work	70,5	<i>4) Lack of references</i>	
Not having enough money	43,2	Getting no more help from this facility	15,8
Not being able to send money to the family	30,5	<i>5) Psychological difficulties</i>	
<i>2) Affective-relational fears</i>		Feeling lonely	28,4
Failing to find a partner	10,5	Not knowing how to deal with problems	9,5
Failing to make new friends	7,4	Not being happy	6,3
Being rejected/avoided	4,2	<i>6) Learning linguistic difficulties</i>	
<i>3) Concerns about permanence</i>		Failing to finish school	13,7
Failing to find a home	47,4	Not being able to understand the Italian language	10,5
No longer in possession of a residence permit	45,3	<i>7) Other</i>	
Not knowing where to go	29,5	No fear	6,6
Being sent back to the country of origin	10,5	I do not know	1,1

The educational relationship, where the minor is listened to and welcomed, is of vital importance. Acting as a reference adult, allowing the child to grow and acquire relational, linguistic and professional skills, and being a promoter of agency are, among the attitudes that can be implemented, the fundamental actions for a transition to an autonomous adult life.

5. Conclusions

The interviewed UASCs strongly feel nostalgia for their country of origin and above all for family ties, nevertheless they have made a choice of emigration to improve their economic conditions and be able to help their family. They are happy to have chosen Italy; they especially hope to find work and show good will for linguistic and training integration. The results of the research therefore open to a series of reflections regarding the present and the future of the UASCs interviewed.

The present is lived in positive terms: they feel welcomed and not discriminated; they have a friendship network made up mostly of foreigners but also Italians. On the other hand, the future is a source of concern and makes us reflect on the fact that, on the threshold of coming of age, these minors project themselves into their near future with very clear and important projects (home, work, family, ...), demonstrating a maturity of thought can be explained through cultural constructs.

The multidisciplinary educational teams present in the reception structures should be aware of the emotional and planning experiences of these minors and they should therefore acquire some specific and necessary skills. First and foremost, they should acquire relational and empathetic skills for an adequate educational intervention (Bugno, 2020) that is not (only) welfarist and controlling (Agostinetto *et al.*, 2018) but oriented to the well-being of the minor (Castiglioni *et al.*, 2020), which must be accompanied by adequate in-depth training on the legal-bureaucratic and regulatory aspects. Last but not least there is also the interrelation between the first or second reception services and the collaboration between the various public, private, human and financial resources (Ricucci, 2018).

These attentions allow us to define the need for an ecological, integrated, global, multidisciplinary and holistic approach (Bianchi, 2016; Traverso, 2018; Salinaro, 2020) on which to root an action of transcultural and intercultural care (Traverso, 2018; Fichera and Pitzalis, 2019). It can therefore be concluded that, alongside the know-how, the team must know the dimension of the know-why, that is, knowing 'to what end' the educational practice itself is oriented: the possibility of providing the minor and the adolescent with the tools for the creation of their independence, for the achievement of their self-determination and for the choice of what is the best definition of themselves (Augelli, 2020; Salinaro, 2020).

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SUMMARY

The Italian reception system for UASCs (Unaccompanied Foreign Minors) provides for reception and training programs that lead them, at the age of 18, to officially enter adulthood; however, there is little awareness of taking this status “leap” into consideration. A research was therefore launched which aimed to explore their well-being, the experience in Italy together with their plans for the future.

Between 24 May and 10 September 2021, 57 welcoming communities distributed throughout the country were contacted to ask for collaboration in administering a questionnaire available on Google forms to the minors. 12 structures participated (equal to 21.1%) and in total 95 questionnaires were filled in.

A comforting picture emerged on the reception front: 65.3% perceive great kindness towards them and 85.3% are living the experience in Italy feeling included and accepted. 64.2% are very happy to live in Italy and also in the host structure and they all want to stay in Italy hoping to find a job (87.4%), but they also want to stay because they feel well (52.6%) and the country is welcoming (32.6%). It is significant that 43.2% intend to stay in Italy because they feel safe.

The minors interviewed also have clear ideas for their future: first of all they think about well-being for the family of origin (sending them the savings, getting them to Italy) and then about acquiring material goods (a car, a house). Thirdly, they think about getting married and having children; they also consider engaging themselves in social activities (giving help for the integration of foreigners in Italy, volunteering). Fears for the future are primarily about economic and then emotional concerns, followed by those related to staying in Italy (about the residence permit, repatriation) and finally psychological and personal fears.

The data collection proved to be an opportunity to raise awareness and to emphasize the fundamental importance of the approach taken by the host structures; these structures are the starting point for a life project attentive to the needs of growth, autonomy and independence of UASCs.

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