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## Educational critical events in multicultural residential care communities<sup>1</sup>

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### *Abstract*

This paper refers to the initial part of an action-research (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2017; McAteer, 2013; Kemmis, 2010) that aims to realise these purposes to positively impact the educational intervention regarding minors accommodated in residential care facilities. Thus, it highlights the process underpinning the whole study and focuses specifically on its first phase, dedicated to the identification of the educational issues most challenging the operators in charge of the minors. To accomplish this objective, 57 coordinators and educators of residential care facilities for minors were involved. Preliminarily, the educators filled in a form to determine the critical events perceived as most challenging in their educational work. Then, the facilities' coordinators reflected on the issue during focus groups, coming to distinguish five descriptors for each critical event and ordering them by severity. The output was a self-assessment form useful to trigger discussion and reflection in the next research phase

### 1. The phenomenon of unaccompanied minors in Italy

As is well known, immigration is a very relevant issue on the European agenda. Intense international migrant flows interest the European Union due to composite reasons: economic, environmental, social and political, and certainly immigration is one of the most important challenges for the future of our democratic and welfare societies (Szczepanikova & van Crikinge, 2018).

In this scenario, the matter of unaccompanied minors appears particularly delicate and emblematic. As stated in the Council of Europe strategy for the rights of the child 2016–2021, “children on the move, or otherwise affected by migration, remain one of the most vulnerable groups in Europe today” (2016, p. 9). Every year, thousands of adolescents and children arrive in Europe alone. They flee from dangerous

contexts, from wars and humanitarian crises; in other cases (but not differently) they flee from poverty and the absence of a decent future.

These children are amongst the most vulnerable groups of people migrating across the globe, suffering hardships such as physical abuse, sexual abuse, or trafficking. They deserve to be recognized as children first and asylum-seekers second. To properly adhere to the numerous internationally recognized human rights laws, it is required that the EU ensures, through legal action, that every unaccompanied minor that arrives to its borders receives appropriate protection to the fullest extent. (Morgano, 2020, p. 3)

Unaccompanied minors are not numbers or statistics, but people, faces, and stories. They are children and adolescents who express such complicated conditions as those of finding themselves alone as minors, in a country that is not their own and fleeing from dramatic or difficult situations. Better understand who unaccompanied minors are is not only a condition for responding to their right and to support their growth and integration processes, but also a way to understand the world we live in and the part we want to play in it. It is useful now briefly to consider the dimensions of the phenomenon.

Unaccompanied minors represent an important proportion of asylum-seekers arriving to the European Union (EU), requiring special attention both from a legal and operational perspective. This group became more prominent during the so-called 'refugee crisis' of 2015 when nearly 90,000 unaccompanied minors arrived. (Mets, 2021, p. 625)

Today we register a downward trend that started after that peak: according to Eurostat (2020), "in 2019, 13 800 asylum seekers applying for international protection in the 27 Member States of the European Union (EU) were considered to be unaccompanied minors, nearly 20% fewer than in 2018 (16 800)". In the same report, two in three asylum applicants considered to be unaccompanied minors were the citizens of six countries: Afghanistan (30%), Syria and Pakistan (both 10%) as well as Somalia, Guinea or Iraq (5% each), and this shows how this proportion of minors come from particularly dangerous contexts and very deprived areas of the world.

In this scenario, the Italian context is peculiar, also because of its position in the Mediterranean area. First of all, even if it is not well known, unaccompanied minors are in Italy a long-standing and, in many ways, stable phenomenon. The first significant arrivals date back to the Cold War (particularly with the events in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968), while the following period, the 1970s, was marked by more international origins (linked to conflicts such as Vietnam and Cambodia on the eastern side, and Ethiopia and Eritrea on the African side). From the 1980s, the phenomenon began to be defined as we know it today. At first, arrivals came primarily from the Maghreb area, then (since the 1990s) significant flows were added from the former communist countries of the Balkans and the Black Sea (Carchedi & Di Censi, 2009). Since the 2000s we have seen a substantial 'stabi-

lization' of the phenomenon: we have a number between 7,000 and 9,000 units, with an increasing peak from 2014 (12,000 registrations) to 2017 (just over 18,000) due to the refugee-crisis. At this stage, around half of the unaccompanied minors are also asylum seekers, above all due to the tensions in the North African area and – first and foremost – the war in Syria (MLPS, 2020).

As in the rest of Europe, in recent years there has been a drop-in arrivals, with a return to numbers similar to pre-crisis levels. Today there are 8,383 unaccompanied minors in Italy, most of whom come from the Asian area (Bangladesh 25.9% and Pakistan 8.1%), the North Africa area (Tunisia 16.1% and Egypt 9.9%) and the Balkan area (Albania 8.1%). The profile of these young people remains very stable: almost all of them are male (96.9%) and late adolescents, 87.2% are between 16 and 17 years old (Ministry of Labour, 2021).

## 2. Definition and legislative framework

It must be recognized that, despite the difficulties, over the years the regulatory framework has taken important steps forward.

Over the years, the EU has developed a substantial body of legal guarantees for unaccompanied minors, mainstreamed across the regulations and directives constituting the CEAS [Common European Asylum System] (Mets, 2021, p. 626).

The fundamental reference is to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its principle of the best interests of the child, mostly connected – in the case of unaccompanied minors – to the wellbeing, social development and family reunification possibilities.

Today's definition of the term reads minors who arrive “on the territory of an EU Member unaccompanied by the adult responsible for them by law or by the practice of the EU Member State concerned, and for as long as they are not effectively taken into the care of such a person” (EMN, 2018, p. 387; EU, 2011).

Saglietti (2019) states that *how* the term *unaccompanied minors* “is built isn't obvious as it relates with many institutional and practical implications, serving as the basis for interventions” (p. 174). Despite the European Union policy addressed, we must consider that during the years single member states have applied directives or regulations differently. To address that situation, in 2010 the European Commission settled a document entitled ‘Action plan on unaccompanied minors (2010–2014)’ as an attempt to promote a common and coherent system of reception and structured integration that is effectively spread throughout the European territory.

Many EU members still lack specific laws or a comprehensive framework in their respective states that explicitly outline the special need for protection of unaccompanied minors. After several years of ‘regulatory jumble’, it is good news that finally,

in 2017, Italy passed the Zampa Law (law n. 47/17), becoming the first European country to create a structured framework within the legislation that would protect unaccompanied minors and promote their integration in the country. That law traces unaccompanied minors' rights by defining general principles and practical directions on their reception. Article 1 declares that these minors benefit from protection as well as Italian or European Union children do, with the clear "prohibition of rejection" (Article 3). Article 4 sets the duty of welcome at "first assistance and reception services" aimed at accompanying them towards adulthood by setting long-term integration measures (Article 13).

Whether it proves effective or not, the Zampa Law could serve as the model for other EU countries to follow if they have plans to pass future legislation protecting unaccompanied minors as the phenomenon of child migration continues. (Morgano, 2020, p. 4)

### 3. Facilities care system and challenges

Despite this important change, the reception process is still not fully structured or well-defined, and we still have a gap between policy and practice (Santagati, 2020). Anyway, when unaccompanied children arrived in Italy or are found in the Italian territory, they are taken care of by the reception system. Many of them (49.9% – MLPS, 2020) arrive by the Mediterranean Sea, thus some regions – such as Sicily – are particularly affected, and the hosting care system is likely to be overloaded. After the phase of first welcome services and identification, the Italian system entails this young people accommodation mainly (88.7%) in "foster care homes, residential care homes, low-threshold centers, in the case of teens close to adulthood" (Catarci & Rocchi, 2017, p. 112). "The majority of minors are received into facilities affiliate with local municipalities, rather than facilities organized within the System for the Protection of Asylum Seekers and Refugees" (Demurtas, Vitiello, Accoritini, Skoda & Perillo, 2018, p. 37), so it is difficult to identify a single model of intervention due to the various approaches structured at the local level. The other option for the second reception is hosting families, but in fact it is a very residual choice (less than 5% of the total).

Considering the described panorama, it is important to explore how to support and improve the effectiveness of the residential care system, because this system plays a central role and accommodates the majority of minors. In order to make it clear, the purpose of reception facilities is to guarantee minors the protection and care necessary for their best interests, starting with room and board, but above all a social/educational project that includes linguistic formation, education and professional training, health care, and primary socialization. Of course, they have to receive legal support defined by their legal status, such as a residence permit for minors and the classification of their asylum application.

This is what residential educational services should theoretically be able to guarantee. In practice, however, there are several obstacles due to various reasons, and for our analysis it is now useful to focus on some critical aspects.

As stated by Catarci and Rocchi (2017), “the on material needs, while paying little attention to the educational, social and economic needs” (p. 109). Often, we can find a ‘hyper-functional approach to their life project,’ centred on very practical issues, but far from a deep educational work that enlarges to the affective dimensions, to the re-knots the thread of family ties, to the development of relational and social attitudes, to the promotion of autonomy and responsibility directed to authentic self-realization. In short, there is often a lack of wide educational work, since the one with unaccompanied foreign minors (if it is a pedagogical work) is focused on the whole person of the minor: it has no ‘special’ character, although – as every good educational intervention – it is specifically oriented to the conditions and potentialities of the subjects it addresses.

On the other hand, as noted by Derluyn (2018), we can say that even in Italy, care structures for unaccompanied minors are mainly separated systems, different for services for native peers, and this reveals how it is a migration managements policy (rather than a social-education one) that views unaccompanied minors mainly as ‘foreigners’ or ‘refugees,’ not as ‘children.’

In this sense, we find significant the review carried out by Salmerón-Manzano and Manzano-Agugliaro (2019), in which it emerges that “above all, there are two major disciplines that govern the scientific literature in this field, namely the social sciences and medicine, the first being the clearest in terms of legal and political implications, but the second being the field of determining the age of minors by diagnostic tests” (p. 12).

In addition to the above, literature dealing with educational residential care services for minors highlights two more aspects as critical to the effectiveness of the services themselves: the scarcity and limitation of quality assessment tools and, on the other hand, the lack of documentation of the residential intervention modality and the relative outcomes (Marchesini, Monacelli & Molinari, 2019). These obstacles can be partly traced back to the insufficiency of “reasonable models of residential intervention and specific fields of intervention” (Barth, 2005, p. 15).

Finding methods of evaluation and comparison would be extremely important to positively affect the following three levels: a) educational planning, b) the feasibility and interpretation of the professional action of educators, c) the well-being of the minor children of the communities themselves. In other words, crucial is understanding what is the characteristics of care these minors receive and, for that, it “is particularly vital to reconsider professionals’ discourses and practices pertaining” (Saglietti, 2019, p. 174). Davidson (2010) stresses that research should focus on

communities whose work is effective, in order to avoid negative generalizations and promote the development of ever better residential services for children. Similarly, it is essential “not only to guarantee [doing], but also ... knowing how to ‘read’ what is done, translating it into documentable and communicable objectives and methodologies” (Palareti, 2003, p. 378).

#### 4. Research questions and aims

Considering said theoretical framework, the action research (Cohen et al., 2017; McAteer, 2013; Kemmis, 2010) here presented aims to identify and formalise shared methods of educational intervention regarding children accommodated in residential care facilities for minors. As already highlighted, the research group has chosen to focus on critical events which do not concern only the individual experience of an educator, but the overall micro-system. Critical events represent the key that allows for a real comparison on the educational actions to be implemented, by providing a common ground: along with Woods’ definition, we see critical events as situations “exceptional by virtue of their criticality. This relates not so much to the content (though that might be extraordinary), as to the profound effects it has on the people involved” (Woods, 1993, p. 356; see also Sikes, Measor & Woods, 1985). The questions that guided the research were:

- What are the educational issues that most challenge the operators in charge of taking care of the minors?
- How can these difficulties be shared between educators acting in different settings and how can they be translated into improved educational practice?

Given these research questions, the aims of the study were (a) to identify adequate forms of documentation and comparison of the events considered critical by the educators involved; (b) to foster reflection among the education teams of the different facilities involved; and (c) to formalise the educational intervention methods. This paper answers the first aim and thus the first research question, as the research just ended and the data are being now analysed.

#### 5. Methodology

##### 5.1 Design

A qualitative design was implemented mainly through online focus groups (FGs), choice influenced also by the COVID-19 pandemic (on FGs: Morgan, 1988; Bailey, 1994; Robson, 2002; Gibbs, 2007; Denscombe, 2014; on online FGs: Turney & Pocknee, 2008; Hanna, 2012). Indeed, the research had to be replanned following the Italian health emergency measures of March 2020. Initially, two steps had been

planned: The first should have been semi-structured interviews with educators and ethnographic observations in the facilities. The second would have involved all the participants in focus groups. In the middle of the first Italian lockdown due to COVID-19 (March, 2020), the situation called for a reconsideration of the first step. The study was hence reformulated into three distinct stages (see Figure 1), while the choice of research instruments has been restricted to the focus group alone: this kind of data collection could foster meaningful communication where members are invited and supported in co-constructing shared meaning from experiences (Bloor, 2002; Furedi, 2003). Moreover, the focus group technique has been chosen also because it allows participants “to discuss a particular given theme or topic, where interaction with the group leads to data and outcomes” (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 532; cf. Smithson, 2000; Hydén & Bulow, 2003). The focus groups took place online through the Zoom platform: consequently, the transcription of the sessions’ video recordings and the field notes that the researcher collected during the meetings were the forms of documentation that allowed to keep track of the conversations.

## 5.2 Population and sample

The target population of the study was educators working in residential care facilities for minors in group settings in the Northeast of Italy: 10 of the 18 structures active in the territory voluntarily joined the action-research. The study sample is a convenience one (Cohen et al., 2017). The involvement of people took place through two modalities: in the initial and final phases of the research, the coordinators of the facilities were engaged; in the central stage, the educators actively working in the facilities were mostly involved. Overall, 10 coordinators (F = 4, M = 6) and 47 the total number of educators (F = 23, M = 24) participated in the study.

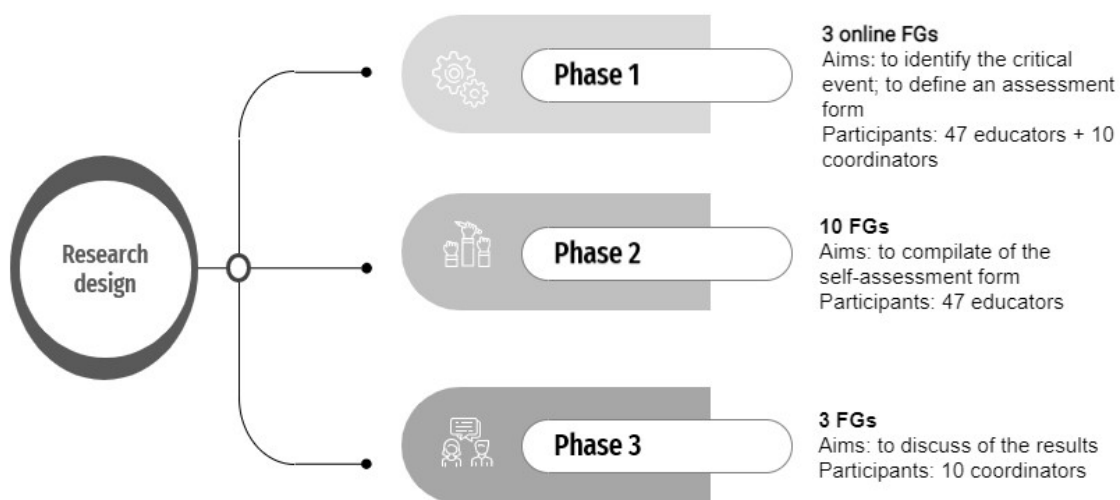
## 5.3 Process

The first phase was carried out between March and June 2020: the teams of the 10 facilities were asked to identify and report on at least one critical event experienced, a particular situation that has tested – or was testing at the time – the educational work and the holding of the residential care facility. The participants had previously completed a specific form with the outline for the critical event’s description: the information concerned the actors involved and the specific time in which the occurrence took place. In addition to the description of the event, the educators were asked to specify possible links with previous facts and dynamics, the decisions taken, and also their understanding and interpretative hypotheses. Later on, 3 focus groups lasting two hours each were held online through Zoom in which 10 coordinators, one per facility, were engaged in a communal reflection moving from the critical events

identified through the forms. The goal in this stage was to define an assessment form to be filled in by the educators of residential facilities.

To summarise, the first form was used to identify the critical events that challenge educators the most through an analysis of the frequency of the displayed topics (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then, the coordinators discussed in focus groups what emerged and for each critical event they built a five-point scale identifying descriptors ordered them by severity. Said descriptors came to constitute an assessment form to be employed by educators when analysing possible critical events in their facilities.

Figure 1: The research design



In the second stage (July to October 2020), meetings of the focus groups involving 47 educators from the different residential facilities took place. Thanks to the loosening of the lockdown measures, it was possible to meet face-to-face the educators: 10 focus groups (one in each facility) were used to collect data through the discussion and shared compilation of the self-assessment form developed during the first phase. Particular attention was used during these FGs to conduct the dialogue by asking for real-life examples and the identification of context-sensitive solutions. The conversation has been transcribed verbatim and qualitative content analysis has been conducted focusing on the practices and the meanings (Glaser & Laudel, 2013). The purpose of this analysis was to identify difficulties shared by the educators, which have then been used as base for the following discussion (stage three) to support reflection, awareness and enhanced practices.

Finally, the last stage took place between November and December 2020 and included the socialization and discussion of the results between the coordinators of the residential facilities. The entire process can be effectively summarized in Figure 1.

## 6. Findings of the first step

A repertoire of critical events has been collected based on the form used in the first phase. Given the complexity of the situations, the discussion during the first focus groups was really lively. Overall, six types of critical events were formalized: damage to the structure, escape, drug use, theft, aggression to a peer, and to an educator. The second round of focus groups with the coordinators had the aim of defining a form useful to assess the severity of critical events at the facilities. Here, participants were divided into 3 subgroups and reasoned around 2 types of critical events each, grading them according to the level of severity: for each critical event 5 descriptors progressively ordered by severity gradient were defined by the coordinators of the residential facilities.

A summary of the descriptors in the self-assessment form defined by the coordinators and implemented by the educators, divided by critical event typology as follows.

### *a) Damage to the structure*

This category includes a wide spectrum of situations, ranging from inexpensive involuntary damage mostly due to inattention or neglect, to intentional damage, premeditated in the most serious cases. Actions such as breaking the door of the educators' office or the facility telephone were defined as 'symbolic' by the participants. These episodes particularly animated the discussion and were eventually placed at level 4 in the 5-point scale. Among the most serious situations, there are damages to common parts of the facility, significantly affecting its (economical) functioning tampering with to others' propriety.

### *b) Escape*

The weight of unauthorized exits was substantially determined by their duration, the justifications provided and their frequency: at one extreme we find the circumstance in which a minor goes away for no more than an hour to meet friends, at the other, the escape is repeated and carried out with the aim of committing crimes.

### *c) Substance intake/drug use*

The occasional use of cannabinoids and/or alcohol "for the purpose of adolescent experimentation" (coming from the data) without compromise of the facility's social functioning constitutes the mildest gradient of this category of critical events. The most serious situation occurs when the minor repeatedly uses substances possibly leading to addiction or is indeed already addicted, or if the minor is dealing in the

facility. The intermediate value in the scale is defined according to the difficulties of management and the risk to jeopardize the educational project.

#### *d) Theft*

The most worrying action of this category was identified in repeatedly carrying out thefts of valuable property within the facility, at school, on the territory. Similarly, serious is for example taking the keys to enter the educators' rooms to steal valuables or other items used then to deal or use drugs. At the opposite end we find the instance that a minor occasionally carries out small robberies from his peers, without causing conflicts within the group by returning the stolen goods.

#### *e) Aggression to a peer*

In the coexistence between adolescents, occasional and circumscribed verbal aggressions to one or more peers, as well as heavy irony regarding ethnic or cultural differences have been identified as the most manageable levels in this category of critical events. The most problematic degree was described through three main points: verbal aggression that can lead the victim to self-harm (instigation to suicide, cruelties), systematic violence and evident lack of remorse/willingness to reflect.

#### *f) Aggression to an educator*

The protection of workers in the exercise of their educational functions was the topic on which the participants discussed the most. Eventually, they determined that expressions of irreverence, verbal contrast, slander, and passive-aggressive behaviours can be considered circumstances that cause little concern. Instead, more dangerous appear the rejection of rules/suggestions expressed by the educator, a challenging attitude, and (veiled) threats. In the most serious situations, participants reported the use of verbal communications to create an 'anti-normative' system aimed at subverting internal rules. Here, the minor becomes the intentional perpetrator of violence against a member of the educators' team.

## 7. Reflections

The Italian context is characterized by the need for research aimed at improving the reception system of unaccompanied minors. National policies define precisely how the reception process should take place by creating a structured framework that protects unaccompanied minors and promotes their integration in the country. Considering this, educational research should inform and grease the gears of the unaccompanied minors care system and educational process, so to ensure its effectiveness and

quality. This means deepening the knowledge about the challenges faced by the educators, the different educational actions or solutions implemented, and the possibilities to actively reflect on educational processes and create shared methods of educational intervention.

This paper refers to the initial part of an action-research (Cohen et al., 2017; McAteer, 2013; Kemmis, 2010) that aims to realise these purposes to positively impact the educational intervention regarding minors accommodated in residential care facilities. Thus, it highlights the process underpinning the whole study and focuses specifically on its first phase, dedicated to the identification of the educational issues most challenging the operators in charge of the minors. To accomplish this objective, 57 coordinators and educators of residential care facilities for minors were involved. Preliminarily, the educators filled in a form to determine the critical events perceived as most challenging in their educational work. Then, the facilities' coordinators reflected on the issue during focus groups, coming to distinguish five descriptors for each critical event and ordering them by severity. The output was a self-assessment form useful to trigger discussion and reflection in the next research phase.

Two are the important reflections to be considered concerning the content of the present paper: the first concerns the importance of working on critical events, the second the usefulness of activating reflection processes with educators who take care of the minors.

By highlighting the difficult educational situations that professionals face every day in their work, it was possible to allocate time to share such difficulties and, more important, to start a reflection. On the one hand, this allowed for the creation of a common ground that becomes generative both in terms of educational practice and pedagogical reflection. On the other hand, this type of investigation reveals a heuristic potential because it allows a 'pragmatist' perspective of the research: the action-research approach nourishes and substantiates practices, being useful for the educators who take part in it. Therefore, it stands in antithesis to the abstractly academic research, which is less capable of affecting reality directly.

Moreover, activating processes of situated, shared and participatory reflection on these topics is important to develop in the professionals an educational focus aimed at acknowledging and responding to the specific needs of these young people. This could help educators to move away from considering minors in their care only in terms of their being foreigners, focusing instead on their quality of minors, with specific fragilities, strengths, resilience skills and unique perspectives.

Finally, based on the three phases described in this paper, the action-research will be further enhanced: the next phase will be to analyse a sample of the realized educational interventions within facilities to develop a contextualized analysis of educational activities. In this extension of the study, specific cases will be selected and

involved over time in the study: this will advance staff understanding of how critical events are conceptualized, analysed, and addressed.

Indeed, to examine the processes underpinning educational interventions in response to a critical event would be crucial, e.g., the mechanisms of exchange between educators and the child. The main questions leading the investigation will be:

- 1) How do educational processes work?
- 2) When does a process work?
- 3) When, instead, does it not work?

The expected outcomes of this work concern the identification of how educational processes can be made effective, that is: through which dispositions/steps/attentions/procedures the process becomes constructive and produces the desired and expected effects.

#### Note

1. This article is the result of a collaborative work: Luca Agostinetto wrote paragraphs 1, 2, 3; Lisa Bugno wrote paragraphs 4, 5, 6, 7.

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