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Unaccompanied Minors: Exploring Needs and Resources to Plan Socio-educational Programs into School Settings

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Abstract: The phenomenon of minors who arrive in a foreign land without accompanying adults has been more and more widespread during recent years. The school environment provides a particularly significant context for the integration of unaccompanied minors. The focus of this paper is an evaluation of educational projects which have been designed and operated for the reception of unaccompanied minors in a series of Italian schools. Through a survey, in-field observations, and semi-structured interviews, the paper explores the needs and resources of unaccompanied minors. In the conclusions, strategies to improve programs aimed at unaccompanied minors are provided.

Keywords: unaccompanied minors, separated children, migrants, school policies

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Introduction

The phenomenon of minors who arrive in a foreign land without accompanying adults is of increasing importance within the wider question of migration flows not so much as for the numbers involved but for the increase in those numbers.

According to Eurostat, in 2016 63.000 asylum seekers applying for international protection in the Member States of the European Union (EU) were considered to be unaccompanied minors, a number five times higher than the annual average during the 2008-2013 period (around 12.000 per year) (Eurostat, 2016). In Italy, the latest data available estimates 18.508 unaccompanied minors in the country at the end of November 2017 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2017).

A wealth of studies and research on the subject of unaccompanied minors has developed particularly over the past decade, during which the effect of the phenomenon has been observed to involve not only receiving and socio-political organisations, but also the areas of education and in-field integration (Colombo *et al.* 2014; Bichi, 2008; Bracalenti & Saglietti, 2011; Pausel, 2011; Smith, 2009; Bertozzi, 2013; Valtolina, 2014; Grigt, 2017).

Italian schools have chosen to address the issues of reception, education and training of students with non-Italian citizenship by following the road of integration in close connection with the principle of a school system which is open to all children and within the context of intercultural education (Santerini, 2003; Granata 2012; Portera, La Marca & Catarci, 2015; Zay, 2012). This approach emerges clearly from many legislative bills (for e.g. Ministerial Circular No. 205 of 26 July 1990 “Compulsory schooling and foreign students. Intercultural education”; Ministerial Circular No. 73 of 2 March 1994, “Intercultural dialogue and democratic coexistence: school planning commitments” and Article 36 of Law 40/1998, not amended by Law 189/2002) and has been confirmed through various documents, including the Italian national curriculum recommendations of 2012 (MIUR, 2012) and the latest edition of “Guidelines for the Reception and Integration of Foreign Students” (MIUR, 2014).

Despite an increasing interest for educational policies oriented towards foreign students, far too little attention has been paid to educational

programs specifically addressed to unaccompanied minors in school settings that keep in consideration their specific needs and resources due to their status of “unaccompanied” migrants.

The singularity of this contribution lies in the attempt to focus on the school education experience of unaccompanied minors by investigating this gap with the aim of identifying useful practices for integration processes in school settings.

Methods

This study draws on research conducted between February and October 2016 in seven schools in Emilia-Romagna (a region in the North of Italy) which organized specific projects for unaccompanied minors that were financed with public funds. In the first phase, we administered a questionnaire to the coordinators of all seven projects aimed at exploring the type of activities carried out, the human and material resources deployed, the educational strategies used, and the results achieved in the skills and abilities which were transmitted. In the second phase, we selected two schools where we conducted classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with both adults engaged in the projects (teachers, psychologists, educators, project coordinators) and minors (both Italian and foreigners). The selection was made on the basis of the greater differentiation observed among the projects. The first project was carried out at a lower secondary school with students between the ages of 11 and 14 years who had mostly been placed in family foster care. The second project was carried out at a professional institution where target subjects were teenagers between 14 and 17 years old, living primarily in residential care facilities. In total, 6 classroom observations and 14 interviews were carried out.

Results

Target and strategies

From the surveys compiled by the projects’ coordinators, it could be seen that the seven financed projects were responsible for activities

involving 123 unaccompanied minors¹, most of whom live in residential care facilities (102) and attend provincial centres for adult education (73). However, the projects also involved other foreign students, apart from unaccompanied children, for a total of 219 children. A total of 30 teachers and 12 external experts were also involved. The number of hours dedicated to the projects per week varied from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 50.

Although the projects assumed a heterogeneous nature, the activities undertaken can be traced to three prevalent areas: the expressive (e.g., theatrical, musical, artistic, cinematic), practical-operational (culinary or autobiographical workshops), and language (Italian literacy lessons). In some cases, the projects included the possibility for minors to request specific assistance (psychological and ethno-psychological contact points, meetings with linguistic-cultural mediators) or involved key actors (migrant writer, political refugee, etc.) to facilitate the sharing of experiences.

Of the various activities, literacy in Italian was considered to be of particular importance. The ability to express oneself and to understand others is an inescapable element, not only in order to learn educational content, but also to integrate within the class and, more broadly, the community. Three approaches were applied for the Italian language lessons: a) individual lessons, offered to the migrant with lower language skills, usually recent arrivals in Italy; b) group lessons, designed for the migrant with a basic knowledge of Italian and for whom the creation and strengthening of the social network was considered important; c) *peer tutoring*, oriented to promote peer learning.

Several projects employed additional methods, apart from language learning strategies, specifically aimed at the transmission of supplementary abilities, for example the strategies of *Learning by doing* (Dewey, 1939; Van Manen, 1990), and *Role play* (Chesler & Fox, 1966; Van Mentz, 1983; Milroy, 1982).

Exploring the needs of unaccompanied minors

Relationships with unaccompanied minor students are especially difficult in the early stages. After their arrival the minors suffer from a cognitive and emotional disorientation, and some remain closed in silence,

¹ As defined in Directional Decree No. 830 of 24 July 2015.

internally frozen after the experiences endured during the voyage. Others are intimidated by their new situation and in fear for their future. A teacher recounts:

They are confused, they don't know where they are, they feel uneasy about their future. Sometimes they try to provoke by behaving badly. Sometimes communication difficulties are expressed through aggression. Others become closed in an intense silence, they are children who are in a state of shock. (teacher).

Nonetheless, a few weeks after their arrival the foreign students show an improved psychological condition and seem to feel more comfortable in class, welcomed and accepted by their peers and teachers. Nevertheless, some of them are particularly restless and often show their discomfort through provocative behaviour, a disregard of rules and a reluctance to recognise a teacher's authority.

The task of resolving the general disorientation suffered by the minor, often linked to traumas arising from the critical difficulties experienced during the journey to Italy and from the detachment from their family and community-based network, is aggravated by a lack of knowledge in Italian as the language of communication. The inability to express themselves in their land of arrival makes understanding their history and needs extremely challenging and complex. These difficulties in communication also complicate enunciation and understanding the rules governing the school context and relationships with teachers and other students.

Due to linguistic difficulties, it is also difficult for an unaccompanied migrant minor to express their needs. They feel, generally, in *debt* towards the people who care for them. To put it in another way, the unaccompanied minors risk remaining *passive* in expressing their needs.

Recognising the needs of an unaccompanied minor leads to a definition and classification of what is required. The essential needs of migrant minors may be summarised as: 1) a search for livelihood/financing sources; 2) mental and emotional health/physical survival/body care; 3) education, second language acquisition, knowledge expansion. They are primary needs, entwined with relational ones, of recognition and acknowledgement, of belonging, education, and of cognitive as well as emotional growth.

After observing and speaking to foreign minors, it becomes clear that their first need didactically is to learn Italian in order to deal with daily requirements and create concrete projects.

Another evident need is strictly connected to the desire to *remember the culture of belonging*, to share the connotative elements, to keep alive, by recounting, the thread joining them to their land of origin.

On a relational level, these children have a need to be heard. They need moral comfort because they miss their families, their countries. At this point I encourage them to talk about their country, aiding their catharsis. I ask them to talk, perhaps while looking at a map. It is important to respect their experiences (teacher).

Another need, mostly implied, also emerges; the need to *give continuity* to an experience, to strengthen the ties of meaning between past, present and future, *to curb fragmentation*. These young people live in nostalgia for their previous homes, and the lack of intimacy normally found in family relationships leads them in particular to seek relational spaces in which they may in part offset a void in affection. This manifests itself in a direct or indirect demand for attention from adults, but also in the need to meet peers who are not just 'companions of misfortune', but who share their similar situation.

What they in fact directly and plainly express is a *need to meet peers in a 'normal' situation*. This translates into the opportunity to be in informal and hybrid environments which allow them to diversify their friendships and not remain '*ghettoised*' ethnically and culturally. A knowledge of the territory and of local services is therefore necessary to facilitate contact with a range of realities, apart from the schools and the community. However, this contact is often left to the goodwill and experience of the individual operators.

Unaccompanied minors also express another important need, especially if focusing on their educational plans – *a chance for self-expression, to move, to put something into practice*. Education projects foresee the organisation of outings or soccer games. These are especially popular as they allow for the development of less formal and more direct aspects of contact, as well as the chance to practice using Italian.

The need to *play and be carefree*, be light-hearted, comes to the fore during these moments. To be able to participate in an active learning programme involving recreation and games within a scholastic context is of utmost importance for an unaccompanied child. These opportunities expand the range of possibilities for self-expression, offering situations where the unaccompanied minor may leave aside complex, problematic histories and rediscover that they have a right to be what they are - children.

The unaccompanied minors ask teachers and other academic figures to be with them in the present, serious and easy-going at the same time, but above all to support them in their difficulties in *thinking about their future, in writing about it and experiencing it*. The need to *understand how to read the future through the present* and to take steps toward an unclear and unstructured horizon is distinct to these students caught in the jaws of time.

The resources of the unaccompanied minors

Even if unaccompanied minors live specific challenges and difficulties, the people who have interviewed them in educational context remain amazed by their histories, and certain that these children have enormous potential.

They have a lot of resources, otherwise I wouldn't be here. Linguistic resources, an ability to cope in extreme situations, knowledge of other countries, a dedication and determination that is uncommon among our young Italians. They also have the resources of youth, their enthusiasm. Look at the difficulties they have lived through, they have seen terrible, shocking things. They have the ability to detach themselves from the saddest things and maintain a very positive attitude (psychologist).

Having tackled a dangerous journey with an uncertain outcome, the unaccompanied minor has cultivated an ability to challenge the unknown and confront the unpredictable. This means they are able to leave programmed and pre-fixed paths and continually deal with the discrepancies between ideas and reality, between hope and fact, and the resulting frustrations and psychological difficulties.

Knowing *how to face extremes* is a skill which cannot be taken for granted in adults, and, more relevantly, within adolescence. Most

unaccompanied minors have been confronted with extreme situations, including the absolute extreme, death.

These skills, as noted earlier, always involve ambivalences and paradoxes, and we must learn how to discern and assess them from a didactic and educational point of view.

Having been forced in many cases to *rethink the migration project*, to alter it physically, to learn how to give a different meaning to their personal histories, can lead to a significant *mental and psychological flexibility*. In the teachers' opinion, unaccompanied minors possess a marked ability to adapt and they have seen how many, even in daily educational activities, are extremely *patient*. *The ability to continually readjust* is therefore an important skill.

Teachers in general note that the students are *resilient*, able to work through losses and *face difficulties positively and confidently*.

The unaccompanied minors have one additional skill, *an enormous capacity for decision-making*. They have made rapid choices about their own destinies without external support or advice, choices often of huge importance requiring a pronounced capacity for observation, discernment and considerable courage in facing risks.

Contact with multiple forms of pain, humiliation and deprivation has encouraged their *determination and stubbornness* and made them certain of attaining something better with *ambition and perseverance*. The unaccompanied minors are not entirely aware of their own resources, which remain hidden and unheard due to a lack of opportunity to emerge, as well as because the minor focuses on the difficulties being faced.

The views of expert adults involved in school projects for unaccompanied minors: self-assessment

The frequent lack of alliances with other actors with whom the children have a relationship is a hurdle that many respondents recognised. Several teachers stressed in interviews that minors are frequently entrusted to family members of the same ethnic group who often resist attending interviews with the teachers, ignoring in particular the presence and role of supplementary teachers. Linguistic or cultural differences, for example the assignment of a low consideration to schooling, are common difficulties when foreign adult guardians of unaccompanied minors meet with teachers.

Networking is an additional important resource in educational work. Several interviewed teachers noted the frequency of coordination between the subject/grade teachers and the supplementary teachers, and the particular nature of that between supplementary employees as a group. The main aim is to agree on the content of the lessons, but also to intervene in the event of disciplinary or relationship problems. The socio-educational relationship leans heavily on the teachers' ability to understand and programme personalised interventions in a coordinated manner. The vocational inclinations and expertise of many educators often makes up for a lack of resources or organisational dysfunctions.

Referring to alliances with other actors, the field experts interviewed stressed the *importance of strengthening network activities*, especially for operators at the regional level. In fact, these links to other institutions within the community are usually weaker. Although the interviews revealed that there had been some contact with regional institutions, for example parishes, voluntary associations and, in general, third sector groups, these have been sporadic, not particularly formalised and only a limited number of the interlocutors involved with activities for unaccompanied minor students had participated.

While not denying the difficulties and criticalities, the schools self-evaluated the outcomes related to strengthening social, relational, personal and language skills as positive. The same positive assessment also emerged from the interviewed adults who, in general, stated that they were very satisfied with the project work they had undertaken and that they had noticed significant improvements in the targeted students.

The positive aspect considered to be of most importance was the improved *level of linguistic skills*. Literacy allows the students to follow traditional lessons in the classroom, express their needs and progress in everyday life, and to be involved in significant relationships with their companions, teachers and other actors of reference.

There can be no integration without a knowledge of the language. It is the first step, especially for scholastic integration. But a knowledge of the language also allows an integration at the social and community levels because it is through language that needs and emotions are expressed (teacher).

Another result highlighted by the interviewed adults was the development of a *greater sense of respect for rules and discipline*. On arrival in Italy, the minors do not accept organised time schedules and fail to demonstrate a respect for the authority of the teachers. However, with time they learn the value of discipline, in part due to the examples of their companions and the formation of a sort of educational pact with teachers.

I tried to be a bit rigid to show authority, but I also worked through a kind of pact - I will give in to you on something, but you must recognize my position. Inflexibility is not always the best solution, quite the opposite, because it creates more rigidity. It is important to understand why there are rules (teacher).

Moreover, the results achieved show a significant contribution to the *development of a sense of acceptance and the feeling of being accepted* and, more generally, of greater integration into the classroom and the community, also thanks to a more evident ability to move autonomously.

Their integration into a class means they feel accepted, included, and that they enjoy being with others. Integration is a state of mind. It means knowing who to turn to if I have a problem. Being integrated into a society means knowing how to move, arrive at autonomy, and participate in the area's activities (psychologist).

Of the various educational strategies which may contribute to this awareness, several teachers name *peer education* as valuable. It is considered an especially relevant strategy because peer education interventions favour the integration of the migrant and have positive effects for the Italian students as well.

Although adult respondents involved in the projects that were evaluated recognise that their work has a positive impact, several critical elements for improvement emerged. Respondents underlined specific points which were in their opinion necessary to improve the socio-educational projects implemented, namely:

- the number of tutoring hours should be increased, especially during the initial reception period. The minor, knowing no Italian, lives in a state of complete estrangement in the class. While stressing the need to promote

integration in the classroom, teachers feel it is necessary to require an intensive Italian literacy course on arrival and prior to insertion in the class;

- ministerial recognition of the supplementary teacher's position is necessary to legitimize the role. The position should be entrusted to a single teacher in order to avoid problems with different teaching methods and coordination;

- formalisation of the projects should be enhanced in order to more systematically define needs and ex ante objectives and rely less on teacher improvisation;

- network activities with the territory should be strengthened through formal meetings involving all the actors which may possibly contribute to the unaccompanied minors' integration and welfare. Ongoing institutional support for these opportunities for contact and cooperation would be desirable, in view of their extraordinary value for the personal progress of each unaccompanied minor;

- workshops and laboratories in curricula planning should be extended and regional extra-curricular activities enhanced, be free of charge and easily accessible to all foreign minors, creating the utmost opportunities for unaccompanied minors to express themselves and meet other young people in an informal environment;

- the unaccompanied minors could be given greater possibilities to engage in associations, civil services and in volunteer groups in order that their skills and competencies may become a resource for others, as is typical for the generative model of welfare (Fondazione Zancan, 2013);

- attention should be paid to gender differences in the educational process, both regarding the role of teachers as well as the relationship between peers;

- the proposals are varied and intense, but often only of short duration. Educational activities should therefore be the object of a stable and permanent investment through structuration, and not confined to projects planned one at a time with funds for a limited period only. This would mean planning integrated projects developed for insertion over a multi-year period;

- teachers and other educational figures could be trained to promote a better understanding of the unaccompanied minors' learning needs and enable more effective teaching strategies.

Discussion

Our findings, according to the literature and the documents relating to the reception and integration of unaccompanied minors (including at the European level²), make it clear that a careful interpretation of the minor's needs is an indispensable precondition for the design of individualised study paths and life projects. As discussed above, these students have unique needs, often psycho-affective and relational in nature, related to the lack of a parental presence.

The data gathered in our study suggests that unaccompanied minors are children who have been required to develop before their time, spurred on to mature in a relatively short period and in relation to tough and usually painful situations. This forced maturity is frightening for the children concerned, who are required to accept abrupt changes and to grow up suddenly and without adequate preparation. In other words, the experiences of unaccompanied minors are characterised by a potent ambivalence: childhood and adulthood, forms of selfishness and solidarity, egotism and altruism.

Despite the complexity of this task, efforts must be made to discover not only their most urgent needs, but also their passionate interests and the predisposition of each minor before and in parallel with any learning process. Equally important is to note how working with unaccompanied minor students means being involved not only in the identification of specific needs that, as seen above, are both educational and formative as well as emotional and relational, but also in the construction of appropriate and personalised intervention and accompaniment paths that take due account of the particular resources of each student.

In our research, it has been shown that unaccompanied minors share good skills in terms of flexibility, resilience, problem solving, decision making, and perseverance.

Nevertheless, according to another study (Bichi, 2008), their teachers often find it a struggle to discover these resources, to enhance them and to

structure plans based on their student's passions and potential rather than their limits.

The experts interviewed highlighted the lack of projects designed specifically for unaccompanied minors which take into account their specific characteristics and needs. Many of the initiatives offered to the unaccompanied minors are the same as those for any foreign student. However, while these two groups do have several conditions in common, such as an inability to understand or express themselves in Italian, very little knowledge of the country and culture they have arrived in and school integration problems, foreign students haven't experienced the same rupture of family ties which is fundamental to the condition of an unaccompanied minor.

It should be noted, however, that the experiences of each migrant minor are individual to the person, and even when the experiences are shared, the understanding and skills developed are unique to each child. To put it in another way, the differences between the children involved are manifold on several levels, not only socio-demographic (diversity in age, gender, ethnicity and religion), but also in the migratory path undertaken, relational network of origin, subjective experience levels and personality. These differences require highly customised interventions by teachers and practitioners, called upon to continually design and redefine their own work and take into account frequent, often rapid changes involving the recipients.

In order to understand the emotional experiences of these children, it is therefore necessary to maintain this willingness to listen *over time*. It is important that teachers and academic figures are made aware of and are encouraged to consider how *the emotional experiences are central to the learning process* and integration within the scholastic context, and their link to *motivation*. An investigation of the experiences and perceptions of an unaccompanied minor is therefore a task to be conducted on several levels, and one which, using the knowledge obtained, is fundamental to overcoming normal and initial problems and to establishing a relationship of trust between the teacher and the student. It is a pact via which the minor recognises the contribution of the adult and begins to trust them.

Even if adult respondents involved in the projects recognised that their educational work had a positive impact (in particular in terms of linguistic learning and respect of the rules), several critical elements for improvement emerged. Many of their complaints concerned structural aspects, for e.g.:

insufficient hours, the lack of supplementary teachers, the need to formalise the projects, and to reinforce the network of professionals – inside and outside the school setting.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the project orientation which emerges from the research path relating to integration policies of unaccompanied children revolves around four short steps:

1. the enhancement and consolidation of existing mechanisms;
2. the recognition of the educational specificity of the unaccompanied minor;
3. the structuring of a selection of operating lines;
4. a constant attention to reflexivity.

The first point - the enhancement and consolidation of existing mechanisms - calls into question first and foremost the ability of the school system to implement those devices that should, in fact, be a consolidated and structural practice for the integration of foreign pupils. Any didactic geared towards responding to a special educational need requires, first of all, a positively assessed didactic approach based on the principles of inclusivity. Education and training planning for unaccompanied minors therefore requires that schools be capable of implementing normal practices regarding their reception, literacy and language-enhancing lessons and participation in ordinary classes. The unaccompanied minor therefore offers a significant opportunity to enhance and consolidate the positive work accomplished in recent years for the general welcome of students without Italian citizenship.

However, it is also important to consider a second aspect; recognising the educational specificity of unaccompanied minors. The educational work with them, conducted by schools, has also taught us that although these basic mechanisms are necessary, they are probably insufficient. In fact, the increase in this type of student, along with the much larger reality of second generation non-Italian students, stresses the importance of thinking about integration *in plural terms* and, in consequence, of promoting greater reflection on the educational specificity characterising each category of non-Italian students.

In the case of unaccompanied minors, this specificity can be summarised by stating that each of these students generally presents a multiplicity of educational needs. It is this existence of simultaneous needs linked to both personal history and evolutionary development which differentiates their profile from that of foreign students who have migrated with their families, and even more so from second generation non-Italian students. This accumulation of parallel needs may be even mutually conflictual and require, logically, an articulated intervention involving several actors.

The third point concerns the structuring of operating lines. The complexity, referred to directly above, of an unaccompanied migrant minor's educational needs requires the school system to structure interventions consistent with the four methodological guidelines of inclusive didactics, which may be summarised as:

a) *Customisation*. Each pupil needs, during their educational path, to experience an educational relationship in which they feel in personal contact with a trusted and empowering person. The greater the difficulty a student has in 'keeping up' with others, the greater this need becomes.

b) *Socialisation*. The educational path is not a solitary one. Relationships with companions are a fundamental affective and cognitive resource. Students in difficulty often experience an extreme loneliness in meeting the demands that the school and social systems place on them.

c) *Orientation*. Education systems are much more effective when the student understands the positive reasons for making an effort and when they feel not only as the recipient of an action but also when they are assisted in constructing a project related to their own lives.

d) *School-territory integration*. Every school institution is self-contained as a reality, but they are not self-sufficient. It is in fact the centrality of every student which makes the interweaving of relationships and alliances with other educational institutions indispensable. This need to integrate the input of additional actors becomes increasingly evident as the student's specific situation becomes more problematic.

Departing from these fundamentals, it follows that it would be advisable to plan an individual educational project for each unaccompanied migrant minor entering the school system which foresees

- a *highly personalised didactic path* which integrates individual contacts and small groups with class activities. This course would be aimed

at both the accumulation of Italian and the acquisition of the basic competences expected by the educational reality in which the child is enrolled;

- *self-expressive activities with peers conducted in laboratory situations.* These activities should allow a minor to formulate, even without an adequate knowledge of Italian, their own experiences and therefore promote a re-elaborated process of the experience

- *a teacher as tutor* who acts as a point of reference and support for the minor throughout the entire educational process;

- *an educator and a figure with clear psychological skills* within the school itself to respond to the minor's need for rapport and re-elaboration as it arises;

- *a specific orientation project, including the involvement of experiences* through which the minor may express their desire for autonomy, test acquired skills and give a more precise form to personal projects;

- *a clear involvement in the community* so that, along with the child's school and the educational community of reference, the minor may participate in social experiences which develop a sense of belonging and respond to the need for normality.

The fourth point to keep in mind is the importance of reflexivity. Practitioners need to fully understand what has been implemented, note the strengths and weaknesses and enable verification processes and assessments of what has happened in order to become more effective.

The courage to experiment and the ability to reflect would however progressively weaken without a specific oversight mechanism to ensure that the actors involved in the integration of the unaccompanied minors remain conscious of the relevance of their work - to construct the conditions suitable for a person bearing the burden of a difficult migration journey and the suffering involved to be empowered within their own present and future, capable of participating and accepting responsibility in the relational context in which they live.

In summary, the path chosen to date demonstrates that didactic and educational planning should include not only the acquisition of new competencies, mainly linguistic and intercultural, but also the stimulation of their original potentialities. This is facilitated if the teachers and educators, in their contact with unaccompanied minors, in addition to their roles of receivers and givers, also request a personal contribution, a sharing

and practice of their positive resources and abilities in accordance with the principles of *reciprocity* and *generativity*.

A school which understands how to draw out the intrinsic competencies accumulated by an unaccompanied minor during their journey, and how to interweave these with the skills matured through specific didactic activities, will also succeed in making these children autonomous in the future and free to undertake their own, personal voyage in life.

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