Tackling Extreme Inequalities in Education. Italian Teachers, Reception Workers and the Inclusion of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors

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Abstract: The educational inclusion of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors (UAMs) remains a critical challenge within European migration and education policies. This study examines the role of Italian teachers, alongside reception workers, in addressing the educational inequalities faced by UAMs. Drawing on literature on the teacher effect and teachers' intercultural responsibility, the research explores the attitudes and commitment of the adults involved in the educational relationship with UAMs. The empirical basis consists of qualitative data collected between 2020 and 2022, including nine focus groups with 60 teachers and 56 reception workers, as well as 52 semi-structured interviews with UAMs across various Italian regions. The findings highlight the role of teachers in either facilitating or hindering UAMs' access to education, influenced by their intercultural competence and institutional constraints. Two governance models emerge: an "inclusion-oriented" model, characterized by structured collaboration between schools and reception facilities, and an "exclusion-oriented" model, marked by weak institutional coordination and discretionary practices. While some teachers support UAMs' integration, others perpetuate bias and exclusion. Future research should focus on strengthening multi-agency governance frameworks, reducing institutional disparities, and enhancing teacher training in intercultural competences. A structured approach to UAMs' education is essential to reducing inequalities and fostering meaningful social inclusion.

Keywords: Unaccompanied Foreign Minors, Educational inequality, Educational inclusion, Teacher Effect

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Introduction

The material and educational deprivation of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) is a pressing issue in the debate on migrant social inclusion of migrants in Europe. UAMs are among the most vulnerable in the educational landscape, as their migration experiences reflect global inequalities, evident in the high poverty, unemployment, and illiteracy rates in their countries of origin (Romero, 2022). Their journeys are often marked by traumatic separations from family, perilous journeys, violence, and legal uncertainties, exacerbating their susceptibility to social marginalisation and educational exclusion (i.e. Kohli, 2011; Tyrer & Fazel, 2014; Cardoso et al., 2017; Peña et al., 2018; Salmerón & Manzano, 2019). Upon arrival, UAMs continue to face systemic barriers. Reception systems are rarely child-sensitive and adopt rarely child-friendly procedures; language, cultural, and institutional obstacles limit UAMs' access to rights and services. In addition, many UAMs struggle to navigate complex procedures due to inconsistent regulations and inadequate guidance (Kauhanen, Kaukko, 2020).

Educational policies in host countries, though designed to ensure the right to education for migrant and refugee minors, often fail to address UAMs specific needs. Measures are often temporary and emergency-driven, implemented to mitigate immediate challenges but neglect structural issues hindering long-term educational inclusion (Morrice et al., 2020; Crul et al., 2019). Studies in Western countries highlight institutional practices and teachers' attitudes that discourage UAMs from enrolling in school, rendering educational access discretionary and unequal (Coleman & Avrushin, 2017; Gilde et al., 2017). Some research underscores teachers' low expectations and discriminatory biases, leading to UAMs' segregation into special courses and limited interactions with native peers.

Undoubtedly, teachers, along with educators and reception workers, play a crucial role in UAMs' socio-educational inclusion. However, education is often perceived as secondary to economic survival, given UAMs' urgency to achieve independence. The absence of specialists in this field further exacerbates the issue, leaving minors without adequate support networks. Although the teacher-student relationship is considered vital in shaping UAMs' life trajectories, research on teachers' competencies and engagement in this context remains limited.

Drawing on teacher effectiveness literature (Argentin, 2018), namely the concepts of teacher value-added - the measurable impact of teaching on student outcomes - and teacher quality, which also includes socio-emotional and relational competencies (Schneider, Grogan & Maier, 2010), the article explores teachers' attitudes, engagement, and expectations toward UAMs. The notion of "intercultural responsibility" (Guilherme et al., 2010) is par-

ticularly relevant, emphasizing teachers' ability to look at, pay attention, recognize and respond to UAMs' needs through listening, communication, and empathy-driven engagement (Besozzi et al., 2013).

To examine how the Italian educational system approaches UAMs' socio-educational inclusion, we use qualitative data collected in a large empirical study aimed at exploring the educational access of UAMs in the Italian context. By analyzing teachers' and UAMs' perspectives, it highlights both well-documented challenges and the often-overlooked strategic role of teachers in facilitating educational access and success of UAMs. This research contributes to understanding the governance of socio-educational inclusion and the potential of teacher engagement in addressing extreme inequalities.

1. The Right of Education at Risk. The Case of Unaccompanied Minors

UAMs, particularly refugees, represent a challenge for European migration and education policies (Lems et al., 2020). Their experiences offer an unusual angle to observe educational inequalities: they are often distant from educational systems, and they are characterized by difficulties in entering and attending compulsory education. Without familial support, UAMs are at greater risk of low educational attainment and school dropout (UNESCO, 2018).

The European Union Agency for Asylum defines UAMs as minors under eighteen who arrive on the territory of a Member State without an adult responsible for them, either by law or in practice, and who remain without an adult caring for them. This group includes minors who are left unaccompanied before, during, or after they have entered the territory of the Member State. This definition underscores the exceptional path of UAMs, as well as the challenges European societies face in including these minors into welfare and education systems (Pinson & Arnot, 2020). In this regard, the concept of educational welfare becomes crucial, as it seeks to reduce educational poverty, which is not limited to the lack of material resources but also encompasses the exclusion from access to an education that promotes comprehensive social and cultural integration (Giancola, Salmieri, 2023). Educational policies should therefore work to ensure full educational and social participation, reducing the structural inequalities that marginalize these individuals. The inclusion of UAMs is therefore intricately tied to the intersection between the migrant reception system and the educational-training system. Collaboration and coordinated efforts between these two systems are essential to guarantee not only the integration of UAMs into educational contexts but also their broader social inclusion, ensuring their opportunities for success and participation at every level.

In Italy, approximately 20,000 UAMs have arrived in recent years via Mediterranean and Balkan routes. While public debate focuses on their socio-professional integration, their socio-educational inclusion remains overlooked, unveiling many contradictions in the functioning of the education system in reducing disadvantages and unequal opportunities for UAMs (Azzolini, Mantovani & Santagati, 2019). Educational inclusion of UAMs should ensure academic success and social integration, promoting equal participation between migrant and native students (Colombo, Santagati, 2017; Klarenbeek, 2021).

Italian legislation recognizes UAMs' right to education and, with Zampa Law (47/2017), provides a progressive legislative framework aimed at protecting these minors, including them in mainstream schools. Despite this, school segregation remains a major issue, with UAMs often placed in separate educational tracks, isolated from Italian peers and relegated to ethnically homogeneous settings (Santagati & Barzaghi, 2021). This segregation contributes to a sort of "racialization of education", where UAMs are perceived primarily as migrants rather than students (Herz & Lalander, 2017). Furthermore, institutional biases frequently categorize them as "almost-adult" irregular migrants, deprioritizing their educational needs (Migliarini, 2017).

Provincial Centers for Adult Education (CPIA) provide UAMs with basic literacy and language courses, yet these programs often fail to grant recognized educational credentials, restricting opportunities for further education (Brauzzi et al., 2020). Additional barriers stem from UAMs' migration backgrounds, as many come from conflict zones with weak or inaccessible education systems, leading to gaps in schooling and limited literacy skills. These challenges, combined with language barriers and unfamiliarity with the host country's education system, necessitate targeted support and essential integration measures (Integrace, 2012; Batsleer et al., 2017; UNHCR, UNICEF, IRC, 2017; Atanasoska & Proyer, 2018; Crul et al., 2019; OECD, 2022; Save the Children, 2023).

Another obstacle is represented by UAMs' age profile, typically between 16 and 17 years old, as highlighted by the constant monitoring of the Ministry of Labor. The proximity to legal adulthood often pushes these youngsters toward employment over schooling, driven by economic necessity and societal expectations. This orientation reduces their investment in formal education, further marginalizing their educational prospects. To enhance inclusion, Zampa Law introduced measures such as cultural mediators and personalized learning programs, but regional inconsistencies in implementation hinder their effectiveness. Research advocates for a holistic approach, extending beyond language support to foster psychosocial well-being and socio-educational integration (Cerna-OECD, 2019).

2. Teachers' Roles and the Governance of Educational Inclusion

Analyzing the inclusion path of UAMs, the crucial role of teachers emerges. Teachers' ability to promote the school inclusion of UAMs often proves decisive, transcending the inclusiveness of the educational system itself or the institutional challenges involved. The literature on teacher effect or teacher quality (Abbiati, 2014; Argentin & Pavolini, 2020) or the international mention of teachers' intercultural responsibility (Guilherme et al., 2010) demonstrate how teachers' discourse, attitudes, behaviors, could significantly influence student performance, choices, plans.

On one hand, teachers tend to align with the discriminatory practices embedded in educational institutions, perpetuating disadvantages and considering diversity as an obstacle. On the other hand, they retain a degree of autonomy and discretionality that allows them to respond to the differentiated needs of students (Lipsky, 1980; Santagati & Bertozzi, 2023). This independence is an essential component of teaching professionalism, enabling teachers to adapt their educational practices to the specific needs of UAMs: although the persistence of a systemic discrimination, teachers can leverage their agency to implement egalitarian intercultural practices, developing awareness and counteracting routine discriminatory practices (Heikkilä et al., 2022).

A study involving approximately 250 teachers in Germany (Becker et al., 2023) reveals that a significant proportion of them are "skeptical" or even "opposed" to cultural pluralism in the classroom. This group includes teachers with less experience in teaching refugee children and unaware of the challenges that inclusion presents in the classroom, tending to view cultural diversity as "the" problem. Teachers who adopt a proactive and inclusive approach help create a welcoming and secure environment in which UAMs can develop a sense of belonging and cultivate significant relationships, aspects essential to their educational path and personal well-being (Rose, 2018). However, these competent teachers are very rare, or perhaps invisible in Italy, and research is still needed.

Teachers' actions and school practices for the inclusion of UAMs are embedded within a broader intercultural policy framework, which historically promoted equal learning opportunities and diversities (Santagati, 2016). This model is based on the principle that all minors, regardless of origin or legal status, should attend mainstream classes alongside Italian peers. In so doing, the intercultural approach fosters positive relationships and cultural exchanges among minors from diverse backgrounds (Giménez, 2012). This aligns with the concept of "transformative interculturalism" - which moves beyond a formal principle of equality to actively respect students' individual needs and aspirations (Santagati & Bertozzi, 2023: 19).

While Italy's inclusive orientation has led to progressively refined guidelines published by the Ministry of Education: in 2007, the document *The Italian way for intercultural education and the integration of foreign pupils*; in 2014, *Guidelines for the reception and integration of foreign pupils;* in 2022, *Intercultural orientations. Ideas and Proposals for the integration of pupils from migratory backgrounds*. Their implementation, however, relies heavily on local resources and school autonomy (Colombo & Scardigno, 2019) and individual teachers often compensate for gaps in institutional policies. In many cases, their discretion and commitment help counterbalance insufficient human and financial resources (Bertozzi et al., 2020). However, this bottom-up approach—while fostering innovative school-level strategies—also results in regional disparities in inclusion practices. Teachers' efforts for foreign pupils, while essential, are shaped by broader institutional settings, including school leadership, teacher boards, and local governance structures. Explorative research identifies educational institutions that display contrasting approaches: some embrace intercultural sensitivity, integrating UAMs into mainstream education, while others resort to segregated tracks, prioritizing short-term Italian courses or vocational programs over full educational inclusion (Santagati & Colussi, 2022). This fragmentation reflects a lack of a unified national model, leaving school practices highly discretionary (Di Rosa et al., 2019). To ensure effective and sustainable inclusion, we hypothesize that governance strategies must move beyond isolated school initiatives and establish systematic, long-term policies. Achieving this goal requires greater coordination between national authorities, local schools and teachers, strengthening cross-cultural responsibility in theory and practice. To prove this, empirical evidence is still needed.

3. A Study on Access to Education for Unaccompanied Minors in Italy

In line with the framework just outlined, our study aims to examine the role of teachers in fostering the inclusion of UAMs within schools by adopting a multidimensional perspective that encompasses the viewpoints of key stakeholders: teachers, reception facilities workers', and the UAMs themselves.

We present empirical evidence based on an extensive project, named ALI (Cerrocchi & Porcaro, 2023)[1], dedicated to exploring the educational access

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[1] The study was conducted by the ISMU Foundation ETS on behalf of the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with a steering committee that included the General Directorate for Immigration and Integration Policies of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies (Division II), the Ministry of the Interior, and ANCI. The study is part of the ALI project ("Alfabetizzazione Linguistica e Accesso all'Istruzione per MSNA", that is "Language Literacy and

of UAMs, conducted across two editions (2020 and 2022). This project encompassed various research activities. Here, we will focus on those involving the direct participation of minors and teachers, namely:

Nine focus groups with members of the project networks, involving 60 teachers and 56 reception workers with the goal of reflecting on the access to education of UAMs, discussing practices and strategies to promote their schooling. Involving both teachers and reception workers in the focus groups provides a comprehensive perspective on the dynamics of school inclusion for UAMs, allowing for a comparison between educational practices and social support strategies. This approach highlights synergies, challenges, and potential areas for improvement in the interaction between the school system and the reception framework. These focus groups included participants from different regions across northern, central, and southern Italy: Piedmont, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Emilia-Romagna, Liguria, Tuscany, Lazio, and Sicily. During the focus groups, the primary topics covered were: (1) the teacher-student relationship; (2) the practices and tools for school inclusion for UAMs; (3) networking efforts between schools and reception facilities for the educational inclusion of UAMs.

Fifty-two semi-structured interviews with UAMs who had successfully integrated into educational settings across Italy. The 52 young participants in the research live in various regions and geographical areas: 18 are located in Northern Italy (Genova, La Spezia, Parma/Piacenza, Trieste, Cremona), 17 in Central Italy (Pisa/Florence, Rome), and 16 in Sicily (Agrigento/Palermo/Ragusa). In line with national data, most of these minors were aged 15 or older at the time of the interview (37); six were 14 years old, and the remaining participants were younger than 14. The minors interviewed came from both the Mediterranean and Balkan routes; all the interviewees are male, except for two females (for complete details, see the annex 1). The participants demonstrate, on the whole, commendable levels of educational attainment when considering their school trajectories prior to their departure for Italy. Specifically, 42 of them report having attended lower secondary or upper secondary education in their countries of origin. In Italy, 17 are enrolled in VET (Vocational Education and Training) courses, 14 attend technical or vocational institutes (upper secondary education), while 15 of the younger participants are enrolled in lower secondary schools. The remaining 6 are pursuing courses at CPIA (Center for Adult Education) corresponding to secondary school mainly attended by adults and foreigners.

Access to Education and Training for UAMs") that aims to strengthen the reception system to facilitate their more rapid and effective inclusion into the Italian educational system. This initiative has been co-funded by the European Union under the emergency measures of the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund and was implemented by the Ministry of Education.

During the research, the interview used was design as a biographical outline and divided into three main sections: the past, covering school experiences in the country of origin, relationships with education and family training, access to education in Italy, and the process of choosing the school; the present, focusing on current school experiences, school well-being, relationships with teachers and peers, educational offerings and teaching methods from the minor's perspective; the future, discussing educational and work projects, aspirations, and desires. The collected data were analyzed using NVivo software, applying a coding process that first generated descriptive codes to categorize key themes and later developed interpretative codes to explore deeper meanings and relationships within the data. This approach allowed for a structured and nuanced analysis of the minors' experiences, highlighting patterns and insights relevant to their educational inclusion.

4. Main Results

In the following section, we will outline the key insights emerging from the two aforementioned research activities. To address the research questions of our study, we will structure the findings according to three levels of observation and analysis.

The first level (micro-social) focuses on the relational dynamics between individual teachers and unaccompanied foreign minors, as well as on the interactions between teachers and the practitioners of reception facilities responsible for these minors.

The second level (meso) examines the practices and tools—both formal and informal—that are adopted within school systems to facilitate or hinder the inclusion of UAMs. This level of analysis seeks to understand how institutional routines shape the educational experiences of these students.

The third level (macro) explores the role of the school as an institution (beyond the actions of individual teachers) in engaging with other socio-educational agencies within the local community. This includes not only reception centers but also other social actors and institutions that, in various capacities, interact with and provide support to UAMs. This broader analysis allows us to assess the extent to which schools collaborate with external stakeholders in fostering the educational and social inclusion of these minors.

4.1. Micro-level – Examining relational dynamics between UAMs, teachers, and reception workers

The role of teachers emerges as one of the most significant variables in determining the degree of inclusion or exclusion of UAMs. In many of the experiences shared by the interviewed UAMs, teachers are described as pa-

tient, understanding, and welcoming, able to repeat contents multiple times and face language difficulties. This inclusive approach, where teachers are available and attentive, allows students to feel supported in their educational journey. UAMs' narratives highlight how much they appreciate this support, with some saying:

> *All the teachers are great, when you don't understand something, you ask, and they explain it again* (SIC_10_M_Khalif).

Other students, like Alan, say:

> *There are people who respond when they have time, but they [some teachers] make time to respond to people who need them* (SIC_16_M_Alan).

In these cases, the relationship between teacher and student is based on a balance of patience and understanding, which fosters school inclusion.

However, there are also experiences where UAMs feel excluded or marginalized due to prejudices or stereotypes that some teachers unconsciously apply. Alan, from Cameroon, recounts how some teachers assumed all African students were illiterate, thus limiting his ability to express his potential:

> *It was bad because I felt like the teacher and everyone in Italy thought I couldn't read and write* (SIC_16_M_Alan).

These perceptions of exclusion may result from social representations that, based on the UAMs previous experiences and cultures, risk leading to a reductive view of their abilities. Social representations, as theorized by Farr and Moscovici (1989), provide an interesting lens for analyzing how teachers and social workers construct, based on their experiences and received information, an image of UAMs that often negatively shapes their educational expectations.

Moreover, sometimes the school context does not always fully fulfill its role as an agency of socialization and social inclusion for UAMs, as these young people face difficulties accessing mixed educational environments. The perception that teachers and social workers have of UAMs often reflects a view that reduces their educational path to a mandatory step towards entering the workforce. This approach focuses more on educational commitment than on the development of the relationships that accompany school integration. As an unaccompanied minor from Tunisia states:

> *The only word, the one I hear every day: study, study, study* (SIC_1_M_Adem).

These words highlight an educational load focused mainly on studying, without adequate attention to the cultural and social adaptation dynamics.

Therefore, the relationship between UAMs and teachers thus highlights two sides of the same coin: on one hand, inclusion is fostered by patient, un-

derstanding, and available teachers who know how to adapt to the students' linguistic and cultural difficulties, creating an environment where educational support becomes a powerful tool for integration. On the other hand, experiences of exclusion appear, related to prejudices and stereotypes which reduce expectations towards the minors and hinder their full integration.

Focusing now on the relationship between teachers and reception workers, the focus groups' analysis reveals a differentiated picture. Some research participants describe the situation as "tiring", "difficult" or "alternating", while others speak of a "productive", "excellent" or "evolving" relationship. In other cases, the participants to the focus groups do not express a value judgment but clarify the nature of the relationship between the actors: "collaboration", "sharing", "educational alliance". One participant uses the metaphor of a "kaleidoscope" to indicate the complexity—but also the richness—of maintaining relationships between the teacher and the various practitioners turning around the minor:

> We've always interacted with different people, known by the students, but each time it was someone new interacting with us – so you really get the idea of sharing, because with anyone you talk to, you always know what you're talking about and who is on the other side, but each time it was a surprise who answered the phone or came to the meeting (FG Teachers, Tuscany, D12).

One of the main difficulties in the relationship between teachers and reception workers is the power asymmetry between the two roles. Reception workers, in fact, complain about an asymmetric relationship, with teachers acting as controllers over them, perceiving this dynamic as disrespectful of their professionalism.

> We do not perceive an equal relationship. I am not saying that schools should not be respected in their institutional and formal role, but sometimes, we notice a rigidity in the way schools interact with reception facilities. If the school holds a superior position in terms of power, the reception facility must comply, much like teachers who metaphorically 'pull a parent's ear' when they disapprove of their actions. What I would expect, rather than this paternalistic approach, is a more professional and attentive stance towards the role of reception communities—a recognition of their expertise and functions (FG Reception Workers, Piedmont, A5).

The perceived relational imbalance may stem from the school's lack of understanding of the role of the reception center, in contrast to the clear definition of the teachers' roles and functions. Moreover, teachers report difficulty in collaborating with reception facility workers, creating obstacles for students in participating in school activities or maintaining focus.

The human variable, as in any relational activity, represents a key element that can positively or negatively influence the school experience. Reception workers note that not all teachers are adequately prepared to work with UAMs. In particular, it is recognized that CPIA's teachers are better equipped than those of other schools to face these challenges (FG Reception Workers, Piedmont, A7).

Regarding strengths, there are several quotations from focus groups concerning teachers' ability to cooperate and share the common goal of guiding UAMs in a process of effective inclusion, especially through learning Italian. Collaboration between teachers and reception workers enables the integration of information, understanding the students' situations, and establishing synergistic intervention strategies:

Collaboration with qualified teachers was very important because it allowed us to have a complete view of the students. There was mutual respect that made everything more effective (FG Teachers, Emilia-Romagna, D5).

The communicative and relational fluidity between school and reception facility is supported by tools such as joint meetings, reciprocal presentations, and discussion groups on individual cases.

Every year we have a specific meeting with the reception facility, where we clearly discuss the program and expectations, renewing our collaboration (FG Teachers, Sicily, D4).

A winning cooperation strategy concerns the identification of a reception representative who continuously interacts with the teaching staff.

In the reception facility we have a worker who takes care of the students' educational process. The teachers are in constant communication with this worker (FG Reception Workers, Sicily, A2).

4.2. Meso-level – Exploring the formalization of inclusive practices inside school

The school inclusion of UAMs does not follow a uniform path in all Italian territories but depends on the availability of suitable facilities and of school resources. At national level, there are structured practices that regulate the reception and school integration of UAMs, but the level of discretion of the educational institutions and teachers involved deeply impacts the implementation methods.

Inclusive practices, for example, vary significantly and include the use of digital teaching tools to facilitate the understanding of students who are not familiar with the Italian vocabulary, as one teacher states:

I can personally testify that I have widely used digital teaching methods, including the use of videos, photographs, and illustrated images, as these

are particularly useful for students who are often unfamiliar with the vocabulary. Such resources often convey the essence and meaning of words, thus improving understanding (FG Teachers, Sicily, D8).

However, there is no single protocol for the use of these tools, leaving teachers a wide margin of choice. The lack of clear directives on how to proceed, even during the initial phase of welcoming and observing the minor (often aimed at designing their educational plan), also emerges in special cases that require greater attention and a more personalized pathway:

The observation during the initial placement for the identification of specific educational needs is crucial, because I have personally experienced significant doubts on certain occasions about whether to insist on certain aspects that might be hindered by dyslexia or dysgraphia... However, I must admit that it put me in some difficulty. But having a framework that clearly defines specific educational needs would allow one to work in a different, more structured manner (FG Teachers, Lazio, D5).

An additional obstacle is the rigidity of enrollment deadlines, an element formally regulated by institutions, but which penalizes minors with discontinuous migration paths: "Should students who are placed in reception facilities after October 15th or at the end of November wait an entire year before attending school?" (FG Teacher, Sicily, D5). This shows how the rules of school functioning can hinder school access to migrant minors.

Intercultural mediators are perceived as a crucial inclusion factor, but they are not always systematically provided by the municipalities. As a minor points out, "the big problem with schools in Italy is that there is no Arabic mediator... if there is a mediator, we learn more, less time" (SIC_5_M_Fires). However, the scarcity of these kinds of practitioners complicates the adaptation process, forcing students to seek support from their peers.

In addition to ordinary practices, there are extraordinary projects in Italy, often funded by European or national funds, aimed at providing broader support to UAMs, including the transition to work through internships and vocational training. However, as emerges from the focus groups, many good practices depend on the commitment of individual teachers and operators, rather than from structural and systematic coordination.

This tension between institutional frameworks and individual discretion creates an uneven landscape for school inclusion. On the one hand, there are regulations and institutional routines that define reception practices; on the other, the discretion of individual actors can either expand or limit minors' educational opportunities. While various inclusive practices are implemented, their effectiveness is often conditioned by the availability of economic and human resources and by disparities between schools. To ensure the effective inclusion of minors, the standardization of practices through clear operational guidelines—such as a structured list of tools, devices, and

available methodologies—would help reduce the margin of discretion left to educators, fostering a more equitable and consistent approach to inclusion.

4.3. Macro-level – Investigating institutional collaborations for UAMs inclusion outside school

Our empirical analysis reveals significant territorial heterogeneity also in the functioning of collaborative networks between schools, reception facilities, and other local actors involved in the educational inclusion of UAMs. Among this heterogeneous group of actors two distinct models of interaction emerge: on the one hand, territories where the cooperation between educational and reception systems is structured and sustained by consolidated practices and integrated governance strategies; on the other, contexts where the network is weak or entirely absent, directly impacting the ability of UAMs to access and remain within the school and training system.

In areas where the collaboration between schools and reception centers is stable and functional, a model of collaborative educational governance emerges, characterized by systematic interactions and a continuous dialogue between the stakeholders involved. In Sicily, for example, teachers and reception workers describe their relationship as continuous, effective, and satisfactory. This synergy is grounded in regular meetings to plan educational strategies, the presence of an educational coordinator within the reception facilities acting as a liaison with teachers, and the support of linguistic mediators facilitating communication between schools and students.

> *The relationship with the facilities is one of the shared responsibilities, with truly satisfactory outcomes because our collaboration starts at the very beginning of the school year. We issue a circular on our website to convene a dedicated meeting with the facilities, specifying the date and time. During this meeting, we discuss the curriculum, the school's annual plan, and we renew our mutual expectations—what we expect from them and what they expect from us. And I must say that they support us in every way. First and foremost, we identify the educational coordinator in each reception facility, as we aim to distinguish specific roles: the driver who accompanies them is one thing, the psychologist is another, and the educational coordinator is the one who follows them at home with their homework* (FG Teachers, Sicily, D4).

Another successful model emerges in Emilia-Romagna, where the school-reception center collaboration is embedded within a broader multi-stakeholder educational governance system. In this context, the synergy between educational institutions, local authorities, and no profit organizations is supported by cooperation protocols, including agreements with universities, and by territorial coordination platforms that provide trainees for tutoring activities or cultural mediation:

The group was created for this very purpose—to build a network between municipalities and associations. With 14 municipalities and thirty associations, it can only be described as excellent collaboration (FG Reception Workers, Emilia-Romagna, A13).

The commitment to building an effective educational network is also reflected in the organization of training programs for reception workers and in the promotion of extracurricular activities for UAMs, useful for the development of their extra-curricular skills, yet still fundamental for their learning path and social inclusion, as in the case of obtaining a driver's license:

We have built a network and established multiple cooperation agreements with various associations, including agencies for housing orientation and driving schools for newly-of-age youths, for whom obtaining a driver's license represents a primary need. We strive in every possible way to expand our network to ensure the possibility of providing a comprehensive, 360-degree integration pathway for our beneficiaries (FG Reception Workers, Sicily, A17).

The strong territorial embeddedness of these systems enables UAMs not only to access formal education but also to engage in educational and employment-oriented initiatives that facilitate their social inclusion. One notable example is a project in Sicily, which involves UAMs in training programs in the agricultural and restaurant sectors. While in the aforementioned territories the school-reception facility network is part of a broader system integrated with other local actors—where multi-agency collaboration is even institutionalized—other areas exhibit fragmentation and institutional weakness. In some Northern and rural areas both teachers and reception workers report poor communication between schools and facilities, making it difficult to monitor school attendance and coordinate educational interventions for UAMs. Teachers highlight that they often receive no updates on students' conditions and are not involved in the educational planning carried out by the reception centers, which frequently operate independently. Additionally, some reception workers underscore the existence of an asymmetrical relationship in terms of power recognition between schools and reception facilities, characterized by a paternalistic attitude on the part of educational institutions (as explained in 4.1).

A similar scenario emerges at the northeastern border, where the absence of a formalized and recognized territorial coordination system between schools, reception facilities, and local institutions is reported. Good practices, when they exist, appear to be highly dependent on individual goodwill rather than structured praxis and measures:

Not all centers support and care for the minors in the same way. Once again, there is a lack of territorial oversight, a lack of monitoring that

should be in place. There is no coordination (FG Teachers, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, D4).

As is often the case in Italy, much of what functions does so thanks to the goodwill of individuals. The constant dedication of a few compensates for the shortcomings of others (FG Reception Workers, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, D1).

The analysis thus highlights how the network functioning is a critical determinant of the success of educational inclusion for UAMs. In contexts where this network is solid, minors not only gain access to education but are also engaged in a range of experiences that facilitate their social and professional integration. Conversely, in territories where the network is fragile or non-existent, school inclusion risks becoming a mere formal and bureaucratic process, lacking the capacity to effectively support UAMs in their educational and personal development pathways.

5. Discussion

The research findings from this research seek to address some fundamental questions: what is the role of teachers in facilitating or hindering UAMs inclusion? Beyond the teacher-student relations and the classroom dynamics, which are the practices promoted inside school and, at the same time, outside school through the network with reception facilities within the broader community?

Even though the educational institutions, teacher, reception centers and workers involved in this research are particularly committed to facilitating the educational inclusion of UAMs—being focus groups' participants selected among those who participated to the ALI project (cf. par. 5), the study reveals a complex framework wherein two underlying governance models shape educational practices and attitudes. The first can be defined as "inclusion-oriented" and the second may be viewed as "exclusion-oriented" (see Table 2 for a summary of the main differences between the two approaches).

The inclusion-oriented model is characterized by four fundamental aspects that foster the social and educational inclusion of unaccompanied minors. First, the teachers' ability to manage cultural diversity: one of the most significant factors in promoting the inclusion of UAMs is teachers' capacity to navigate and manage cultural differences in the classroom. This ability is essential not only in classes composed of UAMs but also in heterogeneous settings, where native and foreign students coexist. As the literature on intercultural education suggests, effective teaching in diverse classrooms involves recognizing and valuing both hard skills and soft skills (like multilingualism or resilience) that students bring with them (Banks, 2015). Teachers

who adopt an inclusive approach are able to see beyond labels of foreignness, recognizing these students' potential and ensuring that their backgrounds are not stigmatized but rather used as strengths in the learning process.

Table 1 - Summary of the two governance models emerging from the research

Orientation	Teacher's attitude towards diversity	Degree of formality of teaching	Level of teacher discretion	Network
Inclusion	High propensity to diversity management of teachers	High level of formalization and standardization of teaching practices	Widespread and systemic sensitivity, scarce discretion of individual teacher	Good reception facility-school collaboration, involving other local stakeholders. Symmetrical relationship and multi-sectoral governance
Exclusion	Scarce propensity to diversity management of teachers	Low level of formalization and standardization of teaching practices	Absence of institutional sensitivity, sensitivity of individual teachers or practitioners, greater discretion	Scarce reception facility-school collaboration, no involvement of other local stakeholders. Asymmetric relationship and single-sector governance

Source: Elaborated by the authors.

Furthermore, the ability to manage diversity does not only mean incorporating students from different cultures but also addressing their individual needs in a way that allows them to thrive. Teachers who embrace the challenges of diversity often create a supportive environment by adapting their teaching methods and maintaining a high level of flexibility in adjusting tools, practices, and teaching approaches (second pillar of the inclusion-oriented model).

The third key element identified in the inclusion-oriented model is the low degree of discretion that teachers should have in applying effective pedagogical practices and teaching tools. Research suggests that when teachers have clear guidelines and structures to follow, they are more likely to implement inclusive practices in a consistent and effective manner (Rosenow-Williams & Behmer, 2015) because they know what they are supposed to do and they put in practice their "intercultural responsibility" (Guilherme et al., 2010). In schools where these practices are formalized and systematically adopted, it is evident that the risk of discretion decreases, and not only are students not left alone in their educational journey, but teachers are also supported.

The final pillar of the inclusive model, emerging from the thematic analysis of focus groups concerns multi-agency governance and the formalization of collaborative networks. A truly inclusive model requires not only a high level of integration between schools and other social actors in the territory—such as third-sector organizations and reception facilities—but also a structured and institutionalized approach to these relationships. While all these organizations may not have an explicit educational mission, they play a fundamental role in fostering the inclusion of minors, whether by offering training opportunities, facilitating access to employment, or supporting broader socio-educational inclusion (Crul, 2019; Morrice et al., 2020).

In the most effective cases, collaboration between these actors is formalized through memoranda of understanding, inter-institutional agreements, or structured working groups, ensuring a coordinated and sustainable governance framework (Scholten, 2020). This institutionalization fosters mutual accountability, role clarity, and long-term sustainability, preventing the dependency on individual goodwill that often characterizes more informal arrangements (Koehler, 2018). Moreover, a truly inclusive model is based on reciprocity and an equitable distribution of power among stakeholders, acknowledging the distinct but complementary roles of schools, reception facilities, and other social actors.

Rather than a hierarchical relationship in which one institution dictates the terms of engagement, these multi-agency collaborations operate following the principle of shared responsibility, ensuring that each actor contributes to the educational and social inclusion of unaccompanied foreign minors in a way that leverages their specific expertise while maintaining parity and mutual recognition (Ager & Strang, 2008). A governance approach that emphasizes horizontal coordination rather than vertical dependency enhances the effectiveness and sustainability of inclusion policies while fostering a more just and participatory framework for integrating minors into both the educational system and society at large (Rosenow-Williams & Behmer, 2015).

By contrast, the exclusion-oriented model (summarized in Tab. 2) is characterized by obstacles that risk turning the school into an excluding and/or segregating environment. One of the most problematic aspects is the tendency to reduce the educational experience of UAMs to a mere obligatory step towards entry into the labor market, favoring pathways in schools with predominantly foreign students. This approach, focused solely on performance and professional skills, overlooks the importance of cultural and social integration, which is essential for authentic inclusion in society (Crul, 2019).

Another factor of exclusion is represented by the prejudices and stereotypes with which some teachers interpret the abilities and needs of UAMs.

This attitude, emerging from interviews and focus groups, limits the educational opportunities of minors and reinforces a reductive view of their potential, contributing to their marginalization (Morrice et al., 2020). The relationship between the school and the reception facility can also be problematic when difficulties arise in constructive dialogue between the parties, hindering collaboration and making the process of school integration for UAMs more complex (Ager & Strang, 2008).

Finally, an additional limit to inclusion is given by the institutional rigidity of the school, which does not always succeed in adapting to the specific needs of these students. The lack of flexibility in school roles and functions prevents an effective response to the challenges posed by the presence of foreign minors, reducing intervention opportunities and limiting the inclusive potential of the educational context (Scholten, 2020b).

On the level of practices, the rigidity of regulations, particularly enrollment deadlines and administrative deadlines, constitutes a significant obstacle, as it penalizes minors with discontinuous migration paths, forcing them to delay their entry into school for a year. Moreover, the discretion of individual teachers, while allowing flexibility, makes integration dependent on resources and individual capabilities, without a structured and uniform coordination between schools.

Moreover, this model is not only characterized by the absence of a formalized network but also by a lack of reciprocal recognition of responsibilities between schools and reception centers. The role of each actor in the process of social and educational inclusion is neither acknowledged nor respected, leading to imbalances of power and reinforcing a hierarchical rather than cooperative relationship. In such contexts, the inclusion of UAMs becomes a bureaucratic rather than an educational and social process, reducing their opportunities for meaningful integration and long-term empowerment.

Conclusion

The role of teachers in the social inclusion of UAMs extends far beyond the educational sphere. It requires active engagement in counteracting extreme socio-educational inequalities, advocating for institutional change, and fostering structural conditions that enable full participation in learning. Teachers are not merely implementers of policies; rather, they must be recognized as policymakers in their own right—professionals with the capacity to shape educational practices, influence institutional decisions, and bridge gaps in multi-level governance. Their agency extends from the classroom to the broader educational and social ecosystem, where they must advocate for inclusion, equity, and systemic reform (Ferizi-Miftari & Rexha, 2018; Meijer, 2021).

However, the teacher's impact is maximized only within a networked governance model, where schools operate in equal partnership with reception facilities, social services, and third-sector organizations. An inclusive school system cannot function in isolation, nor should it impose top-down decision-making on community actors. A truly transformative approach requires horizontal collaboration, where schools, reception agencies, and other stakeholders work together as co-constructors of inclusion policies, co-designing interventions that transcend bureaucratic constraints and respond flexibly to students' real needs. This shift demands not only a redistribution of responsibility but also a redefinition of power relations, ensuring that all actors contribute based on their expertise while maintaining a relationship of reciprocity and mutual recognition (Zembylas & Bekerman, 2019; Watkins, 2022).

Ultimately, inclusion cannot be left to spontaneous initiatives or the goodwill of individual educators. It must be intentionally enacted as a structured, systemic, and goal-oriented process. Teachers who embrace their role as a policymaker within a multi-agency governance framework are not just educators but a driver of institutional transformation, capable of influencing not only their students' trajectories but also the policies and mechanisms that shape educational access and equity. By embedding teachers in a formalized and sustainable multi-stakeholder network, educational institutions can shift from being sites of reception to active agents of social change, contributing to reducing inequalities and ensuring learning opportunities and meaningful social inclusion for all (Hinnant-Crawford, 2016).

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Annexes

Annex 1. Main Characteristics of the Interviewed Unaccompanied Foreign Minors

Code Interview Fictitious name	Region	Sex	Origin	Birth year	Length of stay in Italy	Education attended in the country of origin	Education attended in Italy at the moment of the interview
TS_1_M_Florian	Friuli VG	M	Albania	2006	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	VET course
TS_2_M_Hazem	Friuli VG	M	Egypt	2005	Less than 1 year	Upper Sec.	Trade school
TS_3_M_Ledio	Friuli VG	M	Albania	2005	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	VET course
TS_4_M_Rehan	Friuli VG	M	Pakistan	2009	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
TS_5_M_Tayab	Friuli VG	M	Pakistan	2008	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
LIG_1_M_Dinush	Liguria	M	Albania	2006	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Trade school
LIG_2_M_Jason	Liguria	M	Albania	2006	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
LIG_3_M_Manuel	Liguria	M	Egypt	2007	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Trade school
LIG_4_M_Marco	Liguria	M	Ivory Coat	2004	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
LIG_5_M_Marcolin	Liguria	M	Bangladesh	2004	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
EM_1_M_Adel	Emilia R	M	Tunisia	2005	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	VET course
EM_2_M_Daniele	Emilia R	M	Pakistan	2004	3 years and more	Primary	Trade school
EM_3_M_Hammad	Emilia R	M	Pakistan	2006	1-2 years	No Response	VET course
EM_4_M_Ndiaye	Emilia R	M	Senegal	2004	3 years and more	Lower Sec.	VET course
EM_5_M_Philip	Emilia R	M	Albania	2005	Less than 1 year	Upper Sec.	Trade school
EM_6_M_Samara	Lombardy	M	Tunisia	2006	3 years and more	Lower Sec.	VET course

EM_7_M_Samir	Emilia R	M	Tunisia	2005	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	VET course
EM_8_M_Solerti	Emilia R	M	Albania	2006	Less than 1 year	No Response	VET course
EM_9_M_Zack	Emilia R	M	Morocco	2005	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Trade school
TOSC_1_M_Alesio	Tuscany	M	Albania	2005	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	Technical Institute
TOSC_2_M_Enjio	Tuscany	M	Albania	2003	3 years and more	Lower Sec.	VET course
TOSC_3_M_Fakir	Tuscany	M	Bangladesh	2004	1-2 years	Uneducated	VET course
TOSC_4_M_Giulio	Tuscany	M	Albania	2006	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Trade school
TOSC_5_M_Idriz	Tuscany	M	Albania	2003	3 years and more	Lower Sec.	VET course
TOSC_6_M_Leonardo	Tuscany	M	Albania	2004	3 years and more	Lower Sec.	VET course
TOSC_7_M_Lucas	Tuscany	M	Albania	2004	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	VET course
RM_1_M_Aba	Lazio	M	Egypt	2004	3 years and more	Lower Sec.	Trade school
RM_2_M_Dono	Lazio	M	Egypt	2004	3 years and more	Lower Sec.	VET course
RM_3_M_Chat	Lazio	M	Gambia	2003	3 years and more	Quranic school	VET course
RM_4_M_Erijon	Lazio	M	Albania	2004	Less than 1 year	Upper Sec.	Technical Institute
RM_5_M_Jsem	Lazio	M	Eritrea	2003	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	CPIA-Adult education
RM_6_M_King	Lazio	M	Nigeria	2007	3 years and more	Primary	Technical Institute
RM_7_M_Otto	Lazio	M	Bangladesh	2002	3 years and more	Upper Sec.	CPIA-Adult education
RM_8_F_Paradiso	Lazio	F	Pakistan	2005	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	CPIA-Adult education
RM_9_F_Aliana	Lazio	F	Colombia	2004	Less than 1 year	Upper Sec.	CPIA-Adult education

RM_10_M_Splendente	Lazio	M	Pakistan	2003	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	CPIA-Adult education
SIC_1_M_Adem	Sicily	M	Tunisia	2007	Less than 1 year	Primary	Lower Secondary
SIC_2_M_Ayman	Sicily	M	Egypt	2010	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_3_M_Djoulafa	Sicily	M	Ivory Coat	2007	1-2 years	Quranic school	Trade school
SIC_4_M_Firas	Sicily	M	Tunisia	2009	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_5_M_Fires	Sicily	M	Egypt	2007	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_6_M_Hadi	Sicily	M	Egypt	2009	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_7_M_Hamdi	Sicily	M	Tunisia	2006	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	VET Course
SIC_8_M_Iheb	Sicily	M	Tunisia	2008	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_9_M_Issa	Sicily	M	Burkina Faso	2010	Less than 1 year	Primary	Lower Secondary
SIC_10_M_Khalif	Sicily	M	Egypt	2007	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_11_M_Lassina	Sicily	M	Ivory Coat	2005	1-2 years	Primary	VET course
SIC_12_M_Mahmoud	Sicily	M	Egypt	2008	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_13_M_Michel	Sicily	M	Camerun	2005	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Technical Institute
SIC_14_M_Moadh	Sicily	M	Tunisia	2009	Less than 1 year	Lower Sec.	Lower Secondary
SIC_15_M_Suag	Sicily	M	Bangladesh	2004	1-2 years	Lower Sec.	Trade school
SIC_16_M_Alan	Sicily	M	Camerun	2005	1-2 years	Upper Sec.	CPIA-Adult education

Source: ISMU ETS, Qualitative research with unaccompanied foreign minors in education and training, 2022/23