

**From intervention to accompaniment: educational pathways
with unaccompanied foreign adolescents in Italy**

**Dall'intervento all'accompagnamento: percorsi educativi
con adolescenti stranieri non accompagnati in Italia**

Flavio Santiago¹

Full Professor

MUST University

Maria Luiza Posser Tonetto

Ph.D. candidate

Federal University of Santa Maria

Jader Janer Moreira Lopes

Full Professor

Federal University Juiz de Fora

Sueli Salva

Full Professor

Federal University of Santa Maria

Abstract

The migration of unaccompanied children and adolescents to Italy, while integral to a historical process, currently represents a dynamic phenomenon, influenced by migrant mobility and shifts in migration policies. In light of this context, it is essential to conduct a thorough analysis of educational practices targeting this distinct group. This research delves into the educational practices, shedding light on the structural, cultural, and social hurdles these children and adolescents face in their journey toward educational integration and pursuit of economic opportunities. The study's qualitative methodology relies on interviews conducted with educators in 2025, underscoring the pivotal role these professionals play as agents of reception and socio-cultural mediation. The findings highlight multiple challenges encountered in daily school life: educational efforts in this setting go beyond the mere application of pedagogical techniques; they constitute a political and ethical endeavor that demands active listening, commitment, and ongoing reflection on implemented practices.

Keywords: migration and education, unaccompanied foreign minors, integration challenges, socio-cultural mediation.

Sommario

La migrazione di bambini e adolescenti non accompagnati in Italia, pur facendo parte di un processo storico, rappresenta attualmente un fenomeno dinamico influenzato dalla mobilità dei migranti e dai cambiamenti nelle politiche migratorie. In questo contesto, è fondamentale condurre un'analisi approfondita delle pratiche educative rivolte a questo gruppo specifico. Questa ricerca esplora le pratiche educative in Italia, facendo luce sugli ostacoli strutturali, culturali e sociali che bambini e adolescenti stranieri non accompagnati incontrano nel loro percorso verso l'integrazione scolastica e l'accesso a opportunità economiche. La metodologia qualitativa dello studio si basa su interviste con educatori condotte nel 2025, mettendo in evidenza il ruolo cruciale che questi professionisti svolgono come agenti di accoglienza e mediazione socio-culturale. I risultati evidenziano molteplici difficoltà affrontate nella quotidianità scolastica: l'impegno educativo in questo ambito va oltre la semplice applicazione di tecniche pedagogiche: esso rappresenta un'impresa politica ed etica che richiede ascolto attivo, impegno e una riflessione continua sulle pratiche adottate.

Parole chiave: migrazione e istruzione, minori stranieri non accompagnati, sfide dell'integrazione, mediazione socio-culturale.

Introduction

Educational work with unaccompanied foreign minors is highly complex. It involves navigating intricate Italian legislation, varying resources and contexts, and significant cultural differences, even in aspects as basic as food. Many of these minors arrive with an expectation of autonomy and adulthood, only to struggle with adapting to strict rules. Adolescence is experienced differently in their cultures, which requires a considerable effort to adapt (M., educator, Italian nationality, February 2025)².

The excerpt chosen to begin this article belongs to an educator at an educational institution working with adolescents whose lives have been disrupted in their home countries and who have relocated. Her narrative captures the complex conditions of engagements between people whose territorial identities were formed in a social space different from the official country of arrival. However, territoriality is never self-contained; it always extends beyond its predefined bounds, and each official territory encompasses various scales. Her words convey the complexity of this context, ranging from the nation-state to the educational space where she operates. We are discussing encounters where Italy, as a country, and the classroom, as a place, become the converging points for the diverse territorial networks of immigrant arrivals.

Italy has historically functioned as a key migratory transit hub, marked by dynamic patterns of both emigration and immigration that contribute to sustained short and medium-range internal mobility. This mobility is shaped not only by endogenous movements but also by an ongoing influx of individuals of diverse national origins. The Italian peninsula's geographic position in the Mediterranean and its complex historical trajectory have contributed to persistent migratory flows. While mass emigration characterized the late 19th and early 20th centuries – resulting in the establishment of Italian communities abroad – the contemporary period is defined by Italy's role as a country of arrival. As of 15 May 2025, a total of 19,446 migrants had disembarked on Italian shores, a slight increase compared to the 18,456 arrivals during the same period in 2024, though still markedly lower than the 45,507 recorded in 2023. The majority of these recent arrivals originated from countries such as Bangladesh (36%), Eritrea (13%), Pakistan (11%), and Egypt (11%) (Dipartimento della Pubblica Sicurezza, 2025). These contemporary migratory trends reflect the evolving character of Italian national identity, shaped by a past of outward mobility and a present defined by the reception of new populations. Paulo Freire (1996), a renowned Brazilian educator, asserted that teaching cannot exist without discourse – an encounter intrinsic to the educational act and pedagogical intention. He emphasized that this encounter transforms us, as alterity compels life to transcend its limits. For Freire (1996)

whoever teaches, teaches something to someone. This is why, from a grammatical perspective, the verb *to teach* is a relative transitive verb. A verb that requires a direct object – something – and an indirect object – someone. [...] Teaching does not exist without learning, and vice versa; historically, through social learning, women and men discovered the possibility of teaching (pp. 25-26).

Hence, this article aimed to reflect on the pedagogical practices of educators working with unaccompanied foreign children and adolescents in Italy, focusing on the intersection of education and territoriality. While differences and inequalities encompass various intersectionalities, such as gender, race, and class (Crenshaw, 2002; Santiago,

Oriel and Ernst, 2024), it is crucial to consider the spatialized existence of humans as territorial beings. Every bodily encounter is an inter-spatial interaction.

To address these objectives, we adopted a qualitative methodological approach, based on the principles of the *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). This perspective allows us to perform an interpretative and multidimensional analysis of educational practices within the context of migration, recognizing the multiple realities and meanings involved in the reception of children and adolescents. Our primary methodological reference was Bakhtin's (2014) conversation postulates. According to the author, conversation as a methodological strategy forms the foundation upon which individuals, as potential texts, are anchored. These individuals carry languages and voices, experiencing verbal interactions as fundamental to their lives. Research from this perspective, as noted by Chagas Costas and Lopes (2018), entails engaging in understanding with the other, which involves dialogue rather than labeling individuals within the conventional categorizations of technical models that often constrain life within charts and tables: the authors described how a casual conversation with a child on a school bench profoundly altered their research trajectory, highlighting the significance of conversation as a methodological reference. For them, the conversational genre, embedded in everyday life and conducive to enunciation, emerges as a potent avenue for dialogue in research. The theoretical and methodological perspective of the article prioritizes the voices of educators working with unaccompanied migrant adolescents, positioning them as protagonists and primary interlocutors who guide the narrative, making them the beating heart of the academic reflection.

With this theoretical-methodological scope, we utilized a semi-structured interview model to engage with three educators involved in the reception and integration of unaccompanied foreign adolescents. The flexibility of this model allowed us to adapt questions to the participants' linguistic needs and facilitate in-depth exploration of their professional and personal narratives. The educators were invited through a notice that explained the research and the guiding ethical principles. The selection emphasized their direct work with migratory processes. Specifically, the interviews were conducted with educators in the Province of Lodi, located in the Lombardia region, Northern Italy. This region was chosen because Lodi is one of the Lombard provinces with the highest number of foreign citizens, ensuring the contextual relevance of the collected experiences. From an ethical standpoint, informed consent and anonymity protocols were implemented, with all procedures, including the use of pseudonyms for publication, previously approved by the Ethics and Research Committee of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (Brazil). The interviews were carried out in 2025.

Firstly, it is essential to specify how we chose to refer to the research participants. In our study, we used the terms *children* and *adolescents* instead of *minors* because we believe the latter, despite being commonly found in documents and everyday language, diminishes the individuality of the experiences of these individuals. Adolescence, in this context, is viewed sociologically as the beginning of youth. The term *minors* carries connotations of inferiority, voicelessness, and dependence, which obscure the geographies and trajectories of the individuals it describes. In Brazil, the word *minors* is historically laden with political connotations that impart strong negativity (Rizzini, 2021). By referring to them as children and adolescents, we aim to reaffirm their rights, recognize their subjectivities, and promote a more humanized approach. Furthermore, this choice of terminology is grounded in the understanding that language is always influenced by social and institutional assumptions that shape possible meanings. Drawing inspiration from Deleuze and Guattari (1995), we recognize that every utterance involves speech acts that carry social obligations, with words being imbued with performative and

political force. By avoiding the term *minors*, we distance ourselves from a dehumanizing and silencing logic, moving instead towards language that affirms rights and recognizes subjects in their differences while acknowledging their universalities as citizens within a conception of the world and societies that seek to promote life. This foundational recognition of their subjectivity is crucial, as these adolescents *on their own* and *on the move* have emerged as significant migratory subjects on the international scene. Consequently, public policies and socio-educational measures need to be developed for this population. In Italy, this phenomenon has impacted the forms of protection, assistance, and reception provided by legislation; notably, it has made necessary a substantial redefinition of the reception system for unaccompanied foreign adolescents (Accorinti and Giovannetti, 2023).

When entering Italy, many migrant children and adolescents, driven by idealized views of European countries as areas of prosperity and opportunity, encounter a reality far more challenging than expected. Massey (2008) highlighted this as the geographical imaginations surrounding the construction and perception of space, noting that immigration often entails a complex integration path marked by challenges such as street survival, sexual and labor exploitation, and, in some cases, encounters with the penal system. As a result, migration has elicited political responses that promote exacerbated nationalism and restrictive migration policies led by conservative politicians. Immigration has been framed as a national security threat, reducing migrants to problems needing containment. The world's geopolitical relations, marked by unequal production and consequently planetary crises and emergencies, are imposed on people due to their differences. Decrees such as *Decreto Sicurezza Bis* and extraterritorial agreements, including the reception centers for asylum seekers in Albania, illustrate an exclusionary logic that intensifies the precariousness and vulnerability of these young people while creating an apparent internal order that obscures the international order leading to such movements.

Despite their undocumented status, foreign children and adolescents have rights guaranteed by the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, which prioritizes the best interests of the child. The Italian Constitution, in its Article 2 also guarantees protection for the rights of foreign children and adolescents. Moreover, foster care in Italy is governed by Legislative Decree n. 142/2015 and Law n. 47/2017, involving two phases: emergency foster care and integration, the latter managed by the Reception and Integration System. The reception of unaccompanied adolescents is closely linked to the guarantee of their rights to protection, education, training, and support during the transition to adulthood. This is a complex objective, not only due to the responsibility assigned to educational reception institutions but also because of the uniqueness of these migrants' life trajectories. The disparity between the factors shaping the adolescents' migratory project and the everyday reality they encounter upon arriving in Italy highlights significant challenges, particularly regarding the social vulnerability to which this group of migrants is exposed (Ambrosetti and Petrillo, 2018).

One of the primary educational pillars for unaccompanied migrant children and adolescents is guiding them in learning to read, write, and understand the Italian language. To recognize that these young people often lack literacy in their native language, it is also necessary to establish pathways for them to achieve autonomy in housing and secure employment contracts (Zammiti, 2017). In this context, the variable of *time* is perhaps the most constraining factor in the orientation and integration process of these children and adolescents, as it generally requires at least six months of studying the Italian language before proposing a pathway for the young person to enter the labor market and integrate into Italian society. The disparity between time and space demonstrates that

being present in a territory does not immediately equate to belonging to it. In this disparity, boundaries intersect and require various expressions that are involved and articulated in education.

1. Educational activities with unaccompanied migrant adolescents

Educators are professionals who engage in pedagogical mediation practices, promoting the development of human potential and empowering individuals within their life contexts. Their aim is to foster emancipation through educational actions that enhance autonomy, dialogue, and inclusion, as highlighted by Oliveira (2014). As described in Law 15.04.2024, n. 55,

the socio-educational professional educator is an intermediate-level professional who performs planning and consultancy functions with scientific autonomy and ethical responsibility. They work in socio-educational and social assistance services, as well as in socio-sanitary services, though the latter is limited to educational.

The concept of educational practice refers to intentional actions that initiate processes of learning, socialization, and enculturation; these actions are linked to reflective activities developed in specific contexts and situations. Learning, in this sense, is understood as the coordinated construction of relevant knowledge through interaction, and in educational actions, participants are positioned to understand and reflect on the meanings implied in their actions (Biagioli, 2016). For Agostinetto (2017), the educator engages in the everyday life of relationships rather than the exceptionality of specialized care, which is characterized by continuity but also defined by distinct times and spaces that are separate from daily life. However, as Freire (1996) emphasized, for this to occur in a welcoming manner, educational practice must remain open to the world's diversity, fostering openness to others, dialogue, and the collective construction of knowledge.

The core of this work is informed by Critical Interculturality, a perspective that transcends the mere tolerance or recognition of cultural difference. Drawing significantly from Walsh (2009) and Freire (1996), we view interculturality not as a descriptive concept but as an ethical and political project. It is a tool for epistemic, structural, and pedagogical transformation, actively resisting assimilationist logic and cultural hierarchization. The educator, therefore, must assume a political stance to recognize the structural inequalities inherent in the migratory process and construct new forms of coexistence based on dialogue and the full recognition of the other's alterity and difference as a foundational element of welcoming practice. It is important to emphasize that diversity, understood as a hypernym encompassing multiple forms of difference, encompasses a wide range of variables affecting both the individual and collective dimensions of the subject – each individual considered as a member of a human group, whether family, community, social class, society, nation, work group, circle of friends, peer group, or others (Lapov, 2024).

It is within this framework that cultural diversity must be treated not as a difference to be tolerated but as an opportunity to break away from the logic of domination and cultural hierarchization (Walsh, 2009). In this context, the educator recognizes the structural inequalities inherent in the migratory process and in the mechanisms of reception, taking a political stance to resist exclusion and to construct new forms of coexistence grounded in dialogue and in the recognition of others' alterity and difference as part of a welcoming and sharing policy.

In dialogue with this perspective, Ambrosetti *et al.* (2012) draw on Segmented Assimilation theory, originally developed in the United States, to reinterpret the processes of immigrant integration. This approach challenges classical assimilation models by recognizing that integration is neither universal, linear, nor irreversible. Instead, it is a multidimensional process shaped not only by individual resources, such as education, but also by social, contextual, and institutional factors that differently structure the trajectories of migrant groups. Silva (1987) viewed the educational process as permanent and unfinished, operating in everyday experiences and relationships with others, stating that teaching is a way of engaging in the world and taking a stance on the human condition. Education, in this sense, is intrinsically linked to the formation and reconstruction of cultural identity, as well as the ability to comprehend and appreciate other cultures. Educational practice, therefore, is not neutral. It occurs in attentive listening, conflict mediation, and the creation of spaces of belonging within the boundaries that human life inhabits, allowing us to transcend our current selves. It requires educators to be consistently prepared for critical reflection and ethical presence. Gonçalves Júnior *et al.* (2015) also emphasized that educational processes are configured as mutual learning relationships, not merely as unilateral transmissions of knowledge. As Freire (1996, p. 32) asserted, «there is no teaching without discourse!». These processes are grounded in equitable and intentional dialogue, oriented towards cooperation, human development, and the pursuit of *being more*, which involves autonomy, decision-making capacity, and the potential for transformation. Viewing human beings as authors entails believing in their authorship and the possibility of writing at the intersection of the singular and the collective, encompassing their histories and geographies.

An educator, upon recognizing a need, must be capable of identifying it, interpreting it, making it understandable to the learner, and proposing shared paths of care and solutions while guiding fears, hopes, and projections within an empathetic and realistic framework. The educational responsibilities of educators working with unaccompanied migrant adolescents include facilitating their social and professional integration through theoretical and practical training, considering regional opportunities; ensuring compliance with shared norms for respectful coexistence; dedicating time for personal conversations, serving as a reference for the youths; offering support in managing daily life, including clothing and hygiene needs; and conducting continuous monitoring by drafting Individualized Educational Plans and reports. Clearly, educational practice is dense, with everyday nuances that extend beyond the bureaucratic boundaries that typically define an educator's pedagogical work. Nevertheless, it is crucial to remember that the dimension of educational practice demands reflective skills – it is not merely a field for theoretical application or the implementation of public policies. In this context, educational practice emerges as a domain of practical reflection, characterized by its complexity, autonomy, and specificity in relation to the theoretical dimension.

2. The educators' view of pedagogical practice with unaccompanied migrant adolescents

Regarding the challenges of educational relationships with minors, the main issue is linguistics because, in recent times, the youth we receive are mostly Arabs. Some come from Sub-Saharan Africa, others from Pakistan. These are more or less the nationalities we deal with the most. Thus, the first challenge is the language barrier. The second is cultural differences – the expectations of young people and the reality they face daily. And perhaps the limited available time. They are teenagers, almost of age, and have a very short period to learn the language, find a job, and secure housing.

Things that, for an Italian, take years. However, they need to accomplish all of this in a year and a half if all goes well. This is the main challenge, which is difficult to manage. Nevertheless, we noticed that most young people arriving in the Lombardy region have some form of support network – acquaintances or compatriots who help one another. Nonetheless, this is not guaranteed. The difficulty of limited time remains, as well as dealing with Italian bureaucracy, which is extremely complex and slow (M., educator, Italian nationality, February 2025).

The educator's statement sensibly highlights the challenges encountered in educational work with unaccompanied foreign minors within an intercultural scenario marked by language barriers, cultural differences, and limited institutional time. The educational space, as a meeting place, strongly emphasizes these differences intrinsic to the human condition, compelling us to conceive of alternative pedagogies to accommodate diverse lives. A point made by the educator during the interview is that the language barrier is the most significant and apparent obstacle. This challenge transcends the mere translation of words: it involves the complexities of accessing cultural codes, the implicit rules of communication, and the meanings constructed during everyday dialogue, presenting a significant challenge in the process of welcoming and developing educational practice. Although the encounter between different languages presents a significant challenge, it also offers a unique and enriching opportunity that highlights different cultures and perceptions of the world. It is also important to note that in initial reception spaces, minimum competencies in Italian as a second language (L2) are acquired.

When it comes to teaching Italian as a second language, it is important to consider the complexity of these phenomena. Therefore, it is essential to take into account the learners' initial linguistic profile. A certain knowledge of the structure of the learner's first language or languages can be useful for teachers to recognize areas of negative and positive transfer, that is, the linguistic structures that are similar or divergent between the two languages (Silva, 2019, p. 5).

Such considerations point to a broader understanding of language as a living and relational practice, where meaning is continuously produced in interaction. In the enunciative process, living social forces confront other living social forces. Utterances and discourses are always in retrospective and prospective dialogues with other utterances and discourses. Thus, the dialogic relationship is not a simple exchange of turns in a face-to-face conversation but a language activity where both verbal and non-verbal manifestations are present, enunciating axiological positions. In this context, the subject is the being of discourse; the categories of thought and discourse do not exist outside the concrete situation of the subjects (Sobral, 2013). Furthermore, many migrant teenagers arrive in Italy with hopes of rebuilding and improving their lives but encounter the norms, routines, and demands of a society that often does not fully accept their differences and aspirations. The educator highlights this discrepancy between expectations and reality as a source of frustration and tension, underscoring the importance of an intercultural pedagogy that recognizes and legitimizes the cultural backgrounds of these teenagers as a foundation for the educational process. The experience of migrant adolescents necessitates critical thinking, taking into account both macro-structural and intimate aspects related to their personal histories, which emerge in the geographies of encounters. The borders that divide the Earth's surface into states are not official, but rather artificial constructs that inscribe themselves onto bodies like signs. Engaging with these numerous labels entails recognizing that genuine welcome involves sharing. Experiencing is a

relational unity, simultaneously consisting of similar principles and contradictions between the subject and the societal plane. The concepts of experience and creative re-elaboration cannot be considered in isolation, as they complement each other. Other educators interviewed also highlighted similar challenges in relation to educational work with unaccompanied migrant adolescents.

It's a very, very demanding job. In my opinion, being an educator of unaccompanied foreign teenagers involves working with one of the most difficult audiences to manage. One of the biggest challenges is relating their cultural repertoire with Italian culture. Not everyone can facilitate this dialogical process, which can be attributed to both their cultural backgrounds and the school contexts in which they work. Many did not attend school in their countries of origin and come from oral-based backgrounds where written language is absent. Thus, elements such as Italian bureaucracy and the use of written language are not meaningful within their cultural context (F., educator, Palestinian nationality, February 2025).

Working with unaccompanied migrant adolescents is a daily challenge that requires us to reflect on our own cultural references, as well as confront our preconceived notions and misconceptions about other cultures. It also involves being aware that you may encounter disrespectful behavior, a common occurrence in daily education. Here, the human relationship, marked by challenges, can both demotivate and emphasize the importance of socio-pedagogical work (P., educator, Cameroonian nationality, February 2025).

These experiences illustrate the complexity of intercultural encounters and the need for pedagogical approaches that treat diversity as a constitutive element of learning. Ricucci's (2018) analysis highlights that unaccompanied minors (UAMs) and the projects designed for them are part of a broader debate on the intercultural and interreligious dimensions of integration policies, which require attention to aspects such as places of worship, respect for religious precepts, and observance of religious celebrations. This perspective directly dialogues with the challenges identified by educators working with migrant adolescents, who emphasize the need to understand the cultural repertoires of these young people in order to avoid misunderstandings or intercultural incidents stemming from distorted interpretations of behaviors shaped by family trajectories and previous life contexts (F., educator, Palestinian nationality, February 2025). Furthermore, Ricucci stresses that the process of reception should not be limited to quantitative analyses of landings, arrivals, or protection requests, but should instead consider the complex interweaving of practices and dynamics related to guaranteeing the rights to education, training, and support during the transition to adulthood. This interlocution reinforces the need for an educational approach that recognizes UAMs as co-protagonists of their formative experiences, integrating respect for cultural and religious differences, the protection of rights, and the construction of bridges of dialogue, essential elements for the success of any pedagogical or socio-educational intervention.

In this dialogical horizon, the individual's relationship with others involves exotopic action, a position akin to being in an *outside place*; according to Sobral (2013, p. 109), it is «a relative *outside*, a border position, a mobile position that does not transcend the world but views it from a certain distance to transform it in the architectural construction of the work, aesthetic or otherwise». Therefore, being *outside* does not mean that the self is nullified in order to understand the other. It simply assumes a certain distance while retaining its singularity. Thus, there is no individual subject, but rather a singular subject

with its historicity – existing in a specific time and inhabiting many times – and geography – originating from a certain space and inhabiting various spaces –, as well as culture, and thus unique in its collective context. If we assert that pure individuality does not exist, as it is always the other that completes the Bakhtinian subject (2014), the subject in the exotopic process returns endowed with social traits.

Another relevant aspect of M.'s speech, presented at the beginning of this session, is the pressure of time. Young people have a very short period to learn the language, enter the job market, and achieve housing autonomy – goals that take years for an Italian youth. This disparity between institutional (bureaucratic) time and experiential time in a new territory can generate feelings of inadequacy, anxiety, and a perceived sense of failure. To understand these broad issues relating to various time-spaces, we sought insights from Bakhtin (2014), who, in their research, defined the concept of *chronotope* by acknowledging that every context has a type of time and space that acts within it, described it as «a particular connection of man and all his actions and adventures with the spatio-temporal world» (Bakhtin, 2014, p. 282). By recognizing the existence of multiple chronotopes, we can perceive that these «can be incorporated into each other, coexist, intertwine, interchange, confront each other, oppose each other, or meet in the most complex interrelationships» (*ivi*, p. 357), thus forming what we will call dialogical relationships.

The experiences of adolescents in new migratory contexts involve a multiplicity of chronotopes. These encompass, on the one hand, temporal aspects such as the chronological time of bureaucracy, the concluding stages of foster programs, the biological progression of aging, the everyday aspirations inherent in life and on the other hand, spatial considerations include the environments of apartments and host communities. When observed externally, these spaces often obscure the smaller chronotopes within, such as bedrooms, recreation areas, and study rooms. These spatial experiences are overshadowed by the larger official territory, where the country's dominant space compresses these *small* geographies and influences the *smaller* scales, enriching life. In discussions with educators, major temporal frameworks (e.g., official regulations) and spatial contexts (in the Italian territory) are consistently highlighted. Within this framework, bureaucratic time often does not align with the period required for migrant teenagers to adapt to a new cultural setting, nor does bureaucratic space accurately reflect the actual lived experiences of these teenagers. This dissonance between space and time represents a scalar divide, prompting us to question: how can educational environments accommodate these small scales of life? In this context, it is important to emphasize that when analyzing the educational needs of unaccompanied adolescents (MNA), it becomes evident that their life projects are conditioned by structural limitations within reception systems and by economic factors that encompass both family pressure and the expectation that the young person will generate income as a means of legitimizing their migratory trajectory (Traverso and Marullo, 2020).

In this scenario, when considering the training and role of educators, it is crucial to engage with the concept of critical interculturality. This approach goes beyond tolerance or simple coexistence with diversity, aiming instead for a radical transformation of social, epistemological, and pedagogical structures (Walsh, 2009). It resists assimilationist logic that strips migrant individuals of their unique knowledge, language, and humanity. Interviews with educators working directly with unaccompanied migrant adolescents support this perspective. When asked about the necessary training for effecting meaningful and transformative educational practices, professionals emphasize the importance of interculturality, active listening, and ongoing professional development:

I believe the ideal training for educators, in general, involves a degree in Education Sciences, but it should always be supplemented with ongoing, specialized training focused on unaccompanied foreign adolescents. Naturally, intercultural training is fundamental (M., educator, Italian nationality, February 2025).

It is consistently the L-19 degree in Education Sciences. However, in this field, extensive experience, training in administrative processes, and intercultural training are vital. You must also have a natural inclination to form bonds and relationships with these young individuals (F., educator, Palestinian nationality, February 2025).

When we think of training, we immediately imagine a degree course, and I think this is very important, but it is essential to rethink the way in which teacher training courses are structured. The migrant public requires educators to have solid foundations related to intercultural, if possible, knowledge of different languages (P., educator, Cameroonian nationality, February 2025).

The educators' accounts reveal an understanding that the training required to work with unaccompanied migrant adolescents goes far beyond the technical dimension. It demands intercultural formation, that is, a form of learning built through relationships, attentive listening, and the ability to recognize the other as a bearer of distinct knowledge and values. This is a demanding process that requires shifting one's own perspective and questioning the meaning of everyday practices. In this sense, as Santiago (2025) proposes, intercultural formation calls for a careful and ethical kind of listening, one capable of recognizing in the other a transformative potential. It is through listening that educators allow themselves to be altered, expanded, and changed. The author reminds us that the other is the only one who can say things we do not yet know, and that, through encounters with difference, it becomes possible to revisit paths, appreciate what once seemed unfamiliar, and see what previously remained unseen (Santiago, 2025). Similarly, when discussing the educator's role, interviewees described a practice that not only offers guidance but also represents an ethical presence, active listening, and collaborative journey-building with the adolescents:

I believe my role is to help bring out the full potential of these young people so they can make the best use of it and achieve their goals – even when those goals are not well-defined. The idea is to build these goals together, helping them recognize their strengths and understand their needs, providing support through their challenges. It is a complex role, but I see myself as a positive guide, someone present during tough times, aiding in finding solutions to both minor and significant challenges throughout their fostering journey (M., educator, Italian nationality, February 2025).

It means being a guide for people in vulnerable situations, accompanying someone fragile to their goal. In some cases, it involves helping them regain their dignity. Certainly, we do not save anyone. We perform very delicate work. We deal with situations that can profoundly affect us and leave us, at times, shaken, and at other times happy – in various ways, indeed. But, in the end, it is the individuals themselves who wish to be saved, to feel secure, and to change their lives. We are merely companions on this journey, a guide for these people (F., educator, Palestinian nationality, February 2025).

The way M. and F. describe their role as guides and companions on this journey, rather than saviors, resonates with Lorenzini's conception of educational work in second-level communities. In this framework, educators accompany young people through processes of identity formation and autonomy, fostering responsibility and self-awareness rather than imposing predetermined goals (Lorenzini, 2019). The educators' narratives highlight how, for many unaccompanied adolescents, migration entails the burden of trauma, dislocation, and disrupted family ties. In such circumstances, educational work extends beyond technical support: it becomes an ethical and affective practice of care that sustains emotional well-being and helps rebuild a sense of belonging.

On the other hand, also thanks to appropriate educational accompaniment, it can give rise to the mixing and modification of inherited values, the search for new balances, the gradual production of security and stability, of reference points that provide orientation and confidence, and of principles, both known and new, with which to identify. This occurs without renouncing a plurality of belongings and possibilities for identification. Without having to give up important aspects of one's identity and without only a few aspects crystallizing, thus impeding the birth of new experiences and relationships. In the educational field, it should be possible to support the migrating young person not only in managing but also possibly in mending any ruptures with the expectations of the family of origin (Lorenzini, 2019, p. 118).

In this sense, being an educator in the context of forced migration is not merely assuming a technical or didactic role but rather inhabiting a place of radical listening, welcoming, and ethical commitment to education. The accounts show that educational practice with migrant adolescents requires the daily construction of bonds, the mediation of identity conflicts, and the reconstruction of subjectivities marked by ruptures and losses. Thus, the educator occupies an essentially political and poetic role, capable of enacting small revolutions in the daily lives of those who migrate. Paraphrasing F., an educator with whom we had the opportunity to engage in conversations about his educational work (F., educator, Palestinian nationality, February 2025), he is not seen as a savior but as someone willing to walk alongside them.

Conclusions

Italy experiences a substantial arrival of internationally mobile teenagers. While some are fleeing conflict, the majority migrate primarily due to socioeconomic motivations, seeking better futures than those available in their home countries. Nevertheless, the reality they encounter often differs from their expectations, including crowded reception centers, excessive bureaucracy, and different languages and cultures. This situation makes educating unaccompanied foreign adolescents in Italy a complex task, fraught with structural, cultural, and social challenges. The study illustrates that educators play a crucial role in welcoming and helping the integration process of these teenagers. Despite the challenges reported, such as cultural, linguistic, bureaucratic, and time barriers, the educators interviewed highlighted the importance of dialogic action and active listening, which acknowledges the adolescents' knowledge and history.

Ultimately, this article sought to recognize migrant adolescents not as *minors*, but as rights-bearing individuals, fully capable of taking charge of their own narratives. An educational approach grounded in interculturality proves essential, as it transforms each young person's difference into a pursuit of dialogical educational relationships. We previously cited the words of F. (educator, Palestine nationality, February 2025) and

within them, the powerful assertion: «as someone willing to walk alongside». To be willing to walk alongside is to embrace the other's life journey and the possibilities of transforming that existence. This willingness carries significant expressive power, given that when we speak of unaccompanied adolescents, this very act of *being alongside* disrupts such a label and redefines it: they are, in essence, always accompanied.

Notes

¹ Flavio Santiago and Maria Luiza Posser Tonetto contributed equally to this article and are considered co-first authors.

² To preserve anonymity, all interviewees are identified by initials. The participants are educators who took part in the research conducted in February 2025: M. (educator, Italy nationality), P. (educator, Cameroonian nationality), and F. (educator, Palestine nationality). Each direct quote follows this abbreviation model, initial, role, country, date of data collection.

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Short Bio

Flavio Santiago

Full Professor at MUST University. Postdoctoral fellow at the University of São Paulo (USP) and the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF). Ph.D. in Education from the University of Campinas (UNICAMP, 2019), with research at the University of Milano-Bicocca (Italy). Holds degrees in Pedagogy (UFSCar) and Geography (UNIMAIS), and a specialization in in Telematic Education Tutoring (UFMT, Brazil). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7019-2042>.

Professore ordinario alla MUST University. Ha svolto studi post-dottorali presso l'Università di San Paolo (USP) e l'Università Federale di Juiz de Fora (UFJF). Dottore in Educazione presso l'Università Statale di Campinas (UNICAMP, 2019), con soggiorno di ricerca all'Università di Milano-Bicocca. Laureato in Pedagogia (UFSCar) e Geografia, con Specializzazione in Tutoraggio nell'Educazione Telematic (UFMT). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7019-2042>.

Maria Luiza Posser Tonetto

Ph.D. candidate in Education at the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM), CAPES/CNPq fellow. Holds a Master's in Education and a Law degree (UFSM), and a Postgraduate degree in International Law. Member of the FILJEM research group and the project Itinerant Pedagogies: Formative Experiences for Teaching. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8320-0785>.

Dottoranda in Educazione presso l'Università Federale di Santa Maria (UFSM), borsista CAPES/CNPq. Laureata in Giurisprudenza e Master in Educazione (UFSM), con specializzazione in Diritto Internazionale.

Membro del gruppo di ricerca FILJEM e del progetto Pedagogie Itineranti: Esperienze Formative per l'Insegnamento. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8320-0785>.

Jader Janer Moreira Lopes

Full Professor at Juiz de Fora Federal University (UFJF). Holds a degree in Geography (1989), a Master's in Education (1998), and a Ph.D. in Education (2003) from the Federal University of Juiz de Fora (UFJF), with postdoctoral studies at the Universität Siegen, Germany. Professor in the Graduate Program in Education at UFJF and the Fluminense Federal University (UFF). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3510-8647>.

Professore ordinario all'Università federale Juiz de Fora (UFJF). Laureato in Geografia (1989), con Master (1998) e Dottorato in Educazione (2003) presso l'Università Federale di Juiz de Fora (UFJF). Ha svolto studi post-dottorali presso la Universität Siegen, Germania. Professore nel Programma di Dottorato in Educazione dell'UFJF e dell'Università Federale Fluminense (UFF). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3510-8647>.

Sueli Salva

Full Professor at the Center for Education of the Federal University of Santa Maria (UFSM). Researcher in Early Childhood Education, educational practices, childhood cultures, gender, and race relations. Holds a Ph.D. and Postdoctoral studies in Education (UFRGS/UNIMI). Member of the research groups FILJEM/CNPq and ITINERÂNCIAS/CNPq. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6760-770X>.

Professoressa ordinaria presso il Centro di Educazione dell'Università Federale di Santa Maria (UFSM). Ricercatrice nei campi dell'educazione dell'infanzia, delle pratiche educative, delle culture infantili, del genere e delle relazioni razziali. Dottorato e post-dottorato in Educazione (UFRGS/UNIMI). Membro dei gruppi di ricerca FILJEM/CNPq e ITINERÂNCIAS/CNPq. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6760-770X>.