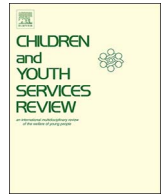




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Unaccompanied migrant minors: A comparison of new Italian interventions models

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of unaccompanied migrant minors in Italy continues to increase. This phenomenon is complex with regard to both the quantity of minors to care for and the fragility, emotional stress and vulnerability of these children. Most of these minors are placed in residential care communities, which represent the classical model of intervention for Italian out-of-home children, but new projects are being developed to create new intervention models in order to improve the care of unaccompanied migrant minors. The present research aimed to describe and compare three new second-level intervention models in Italy. This work used a case study method through secondary data and individual interviews conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire with key informants (projects representatives, social workers, educators, volunteer guardians, and foster mothers). This article contributes to the growth of the literature, and it can provide interesting suggestions for new intervention models regarding the care of unaccompanied migrant minors.

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the presence of unaccompanied migrant minors has become a common aspect of migration worldwide. According to UNICEF data (2017), the number of children who migrate alone is growing and was estimated at 300,000 in 2015–2016, a five-fold increase compared to 2010–2011. In particular, in Europe, the Central Mediterranean Sea passage from North Africa to Europe is both strategic and significant: 92% of the children who arrived in Italy in the first major landing in 2016 and the first two months of 2017 were unaccompanied, compared with 75% in 2015. According to a report by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies in Italy, as of April 30, 2017, there have been 15,939 unaccompanied migrant minors, which corresponds to an increase of 36.8% in relation to the same date in 2016 (MLPS, 2017a, 2017b). Most minor migrants are male (92.9%) and adolescents (60.6% are 17 years old, whereas only 6.9% are under 15).

These children are an important migratory subject for both policy and the literature (Giovannetti, 2016; Jiemenz & Vacchiano, 2011). Researchers have focused on a number of different themes, including integration processes (Roth & Grace, 2015), emotional and behavioral problems (Derluyn, Broekaert, & Schuyten, 2008; Thommensen, Laghi, Cerrone, Baiocco, & Todd, 2013), ethnic identity and ethnicity-related stress (Petersen, Dünnbier, & Morgenroth, 2012) and vocational identity with regard to study and work (Oppedal et al., 2017).

Unaccompanied migrant minors are considered a high-risk population from psychopathological and psychosocial points of view (Hodes, Jagdev, Chandra, & Cunniff, 2008; Huemer et al., 2016; Katsounari, 2014; Unterhitzberger et al., 2015; Unterhitzberger & Rosner, 2016). Furthermore, some studies have focused on processes of coping (Hopkins & Hill, 2010; Raghallaigh, 2011) and resilience (Carlson, Cacciatore, & Klimek, 2012). However, inside the rich framework arising in the international literature that addresses the phenomenon of unaccompanied migrant minors, there is a gap related to the intervention models organized by the arrival countries.

The present work focuses on a European country, Italy, which is one of the most involved countries in the movements of unaccompanied minors because of its territorial position. Thus, Italy is a significant crossroads in the important route between North Africa and Europe (UNICEF, 2017). Italian studies have mainly addressed the issue of unaccompanied migrant minors from the children's point of view by focusing on risk factors (Chiarolanza & Ardone, 2008), the special resources that they can implement, vulnerability factors related to traumatic experiences and the identification of resources and resilience led by the strong motivation to obtain achievement in the host country (Bastianoni, Fratini, Zullo, & Taurino, 2010). Through the life histories of unaccompanied migrant adolescents, Italian researchers have studied the perception of the migration process and educational interventions by themselves (Rania, Migliorini, Sclavo, Cardinali, & Lotti, 2014).

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Specifically, attention has focused on educational operators' representations of the relationship between unaccompanied migrant minors and the families of origin (Saglietti & Zucchermaglio, 2010), the promotion of social services networking (Novara, Serio, & Moscato, 2016), and the construction of the social representation of childhood by social workers (Lampugnani et al., in press). Therefore, in the Italian literature, there is also a gap in intervention models, which this paper seeks to fill by focusing for the first time on new innovative intervention models developed in recent years to cope with the emergence of the ever-increasing number of unaccompanied migrant minors.

2. The Italian context for unaccompanied migrant youth

In Italy and in Europe, the protection of minors is universally recognized on the basis of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations Organization, 1989), ratified by all member states, which is applied in a heterogeneous manner and not always effectively. Minors who are separated from the family remain without the protection and guidance that is normally provided by their parents, with the risk of being exposed and vulnerable to situations of abuse, abandonment and exploitation. However, every minor has the right to live in an environment that supports, protects, and cares for him/her and that promotes development and full potential, in accordance with the United Nations Children's Hospital Guidelines Family of origin (United Nations Organization, 2010). In particular, as affirmed by Hjerm, Stubbe Østergaard, Norredam, Mock-Muñoz de Luna, and Goldfeld (2017), some European countries (France, Italy, Portugal, and Spain) ensure that all migrant children, independent of legal status, receive care equal to that of the host nation's minors.

Italian law on the assistance and protection of minors applies to unaccompanied migrant minors. As minors, they cannot be expelled (Ex art. 19 co. 2 of the Consolidated Text on Migration, *Testo unico sull'immigrazione*, 1998) or detained in identification and expulsion centers (CIEs), and they have the right to obtain a visa/residence permit. When a child arrives in Italian territory, he/she has the right to first aid; however, the number of arrivals has created economic, organizational and interventional problems.

In Italy, the hospitality of unaccompanied minor migrants has been involved in specialized reception structures. Since 2014, the Italian system has provided two levels of reception for children.

1. First-level reception is guaranteed by highly specialized government structures, which accommodate unaccompanied migrant minors during the initial tracing phase (established and managed by the Ministry of the Interior, with the role of age identification and status ascertainment, which also helps accelerate possible reunification with relatives present in other EU countries).
2. The second-level reception of all unaccompanied migrant is composed of the SPRAR (Protection System for Asylum and Refugee Seekers) organizations, which involve a network of local authorities who manage specific structures. These structures have been planned following high-quality standards for hospitality and integration. There are also accredited second-level structures that are residential care communities, which represent the classical social service intervention for out-of-home Italian children (Cipolletta, 2011). The Italian third sector (non-governmental and non-profit organizations or associations) manages these structures.

Some of these children (26.1%) remain in first-level reception until they reach the age of majority, whereas most (65.8%) are followed by classical social service intervention models (second-level), and only 4.1% are placed with private families (MLPS, 2017b). Furthermore, when these minors become young adults, they technically have fewer prerequisites for their placement in the latter two options, leading to their theoretical return to the centers of first-level reception.

The recently passed Italian law No. 47 of April 7, 2017 (known as

the Zampa Law), introduced a series of changes to existing legislation with the aim of defining an organic unitary discipline, standardizing the reception system and favoring the improvement of the conditions for remaining in Italian territory, thus giving sustainability to the migratory project and contributing to migrants' inclusion in the social context. In addition to reiterating the rights conferred by the Convention on the Rights of the Child to strengthen the right to health care, education, and the full implementation of procedural safeguards, the law improves and standardizes procedures at the national level. It also promotes foster families and the designation of volunteer guardians for these minors. It requires the establishment of a list of voluntary guardians in each court for minors. This list may include private citizens who are selected and suitably trained by regional and autonomous province guarantors for childhood.

3. Research

3.1. Aims

Because there are no research contributions to the intervention models on unaccompanied migrant minors in Italy, we aimed to describe and compare new second-level models of intervention for the care of unaccompanied migrant minors. Therefore, we have identified three second-level intervention projects as the most relevant within the Italian context according to innovative criteria. These three projects are chosen because they are avant-garde and have national resonance and visibility as well as a possibility of sustainability in and transferability to other international contexts. The comparison will be conducted through the analysis of the following dimensions: the aims, the institutional agencies involved, the target for which the intervention was planned, the number of unaccompanied minors involved, the strategies and methodologies of the interventions, the actions planned, and the start date of the project. The comparison will aim to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the three models.

3.2. Data and methods

This work used a case study method to compare the new intervention models chosen for the care of unaccompanied migrant minors in Italy. According to Yin (1994), a case study is a form of empirical analysis that “investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context” (p. 18). The case study methodology assesses the relationship among processes, procedures, outcomes and the local setting. In fact, the case report, as affirmed by Stake (2000), does not represent the world but the case itself.

This study was based on secondary data and included eleven individual interviews with key informants of the projects, particularly representatives, social workers, educators, volunteer guardians, and foster mothers, conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire. Conducting the interviews lasted approximately 1 h per participant. The criterion for the participation of the key informants was to involve both subjects who had a relevant role because they were representatives of the project and subjects, chosen by the representatives, who could draw a clear, detailed and articulate picture of the specific practices of the three intervention models considered. The data collection procedures fully complied with the research ethics code of the Italian Association of Psychology. Each participant received an informed consent form that contained a brief explanation of the research and informed him/her that the answers would be anonymous, in compliance with the Italian law on privacy, No. 196/2003.

4. Results

This section presents the results from an analysis of the secondary data that the representatives of the second-level intervention projects shared with us and that allowed us to describe in detail the three cases

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