


CO-CONSTRUCTING GOOD PRACTICES: SOCIAL WORK WITH UNACCOMPANIED MINORS IN ITALY

CO-CONSTRUYENDO BUENAS PRÁCTICAS: TRABAJO SOCIAL CON INFANCIA Y ADOLESCENCIA NO ACOMPAÑADA EN ITALIA


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Abstract

Introduction. The reception and integration of Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) in migration context across Europe require not only adequate legislative and service frameworks, but also effective and reflective social work practices. Within the framework of the European Project *Global-ANSWER* Project, this Italian case study examines what constitutes “good practice” in social work with UASC, drawing on a shared theoretical model developed by the project’s transnational network. The study focuses on four core analytical dimensions: continuity; decolonisation; circularity; prevention, exploring how these intersect with practice and policy in the Italian context.

Methods. The research adopts a collaborative methodology, combining qualitative narrative interviews (n = 14) with social workers and recently adult former UASC, alongside additional documentary and policy analysis. Interviews were thematically analysed using *Atlas.ti*, based on the dimensions of good practice co-developed within the network by scholars and practitioners. The approach aimed to co-construct knowledge by integrating professional expertise with lived experience.

Results. The findings indicate that “continuity” in social work emerges when practices are embedded in inter-institutional networks and aligned with local service systems, thereby ensuring equal access and continuity of support. “Decolonisation” is reflected in the adoption of rights-based, non-ethnocentric, approaches that foster intercultural communication and recognise the diverse experiences of UASC. “Circularity” is evident in practices that enable professionals to integrate personal, theoretical and policy dimensions through supervision, shared reflection, and responsiveness to individual trajectories. Finally, “prevention” is demonstrated in practices that link reception and care to long-term community integration, promoting autonomy beyond institutional support.

Discussion and conclusions. Collectively, these four dimensions provide a conceptual and operational framework for evaluating and strengthening social work practices with UASC. They support a vision of social work as both a relational and systemic endeavour, capable of promoting structural inclusion through co-designed, context-sensitive interventions. By focusing on the intersection of practice, policy and lived experience, this study offers valuable insights into what constitutes good practice in social work with UASC. It highlights the importance of a continuous, decolonised, and prevention-oriented practice, developed in circular dialogue with theory, as essential for inclusive and effective social work with young migrants.

Keywords: Unaccompanied minors; Transition to adulthood; Good practice; Social inclusion; Collaborative research; Italy; Social work.

Resumen

Introducción. La acogida e integración de Menores Extranjeros No Acompañados (MENAs) en Europa requiere no solo marcos legislativos y de servicios adecuados, sino también prácticas de trabajo social eficaces y reflexivas. En el marco del Proyecto Europeo *Global-ANSWER*, este estudio de caso italiano investiga qué constituye una “buena práctica” en el trabajo social con MENAs, a partir de un modelo teórico compartido desarrollado por la red transnacional del proyecto. El estudio se centra en cuatro dimensiones analíticas clave: continuidad; descolonización; circularidad; prevención, explorando cómo estas se articulan con la práctica y las políticas en el contexto italiano. **Métodos.** La investigación adopta una metodología colaborativa, que combina entrevistas narrativas cualitativas (n=14) con trabajadores sociales y jóvenes extutelados, junto con análisis documental y de políticas. Las entrevistas fueron analizadas temáticamente mediante el software *Atlas.ti*, tomando como base las dimensiones de buena práctica co-desarrolladas por académicos y profesionales dentro de la red. El enfoque buscó co-construir conocimiento a través de la integración de la experiencia profesional y la vivencia subjetiva. **Resultados.** Los hallazgos muestran que la continuidad en el trabajo social se manifiesta cuando las prácticas están integradas en redes interinstitucionales y alineadas con los sistemas de servicios locales, garantizando el acceso equitativo y la continuidad del acompañamiento. La descolonización se refleja en el uso de enfoques no etnocéntricos, basados en derechos, que incorporan la comunicación intercultural y reconocen la diversidad de trayectorias de los MENAs. La circularidad se evidencia en prácticas que permiten a los profesionales integrar dimensiones personales, teóricas y normativas mediante la supervisión, la reflexión compartida y la capacidad de responder a los recorridos individuales. Por último, la prevención se expresa en prácticas que vinculan acogida y cuidado con la integración comunitaria a largo plazo, promoviendo la autonomía más allá del apoyo institucional. **Discusión y conclusiones.** Las cuatro dimensiones analizadas constituyen en conjunto un marco conceptual y operativo para evaluar y fortalecer las prácticas de trabajo social con MENAs. Estas dimensiones respaldan una visión del trabajo social como un esfuerzo relacional y sistémico, capaz de fomentar la inclusión estructural mediante intervenciones co-diseñadas y sensibles al contexto. Al centrarse en la intersección entre práctica, políticas y experiencia vivida, este estudio ofrece aportes relevantes sobre lo que constituye una buena práctica en el trabajo social con menores extranjeros no acompañados. Se enfatiza la relevancia de sostener una práctica continua, descolonizada y orientada a la prevención—en diálogo circular con la teoría—como fundamento de un trabajo social inclusivo y efectivo con jóvenes migrantes.

Palabras clave: Menores extranjeros no acompañados; Transición a la vida adulta; Buenas prácticas; Inclusión social; Investigación colaborativa, Italia; Trabajo social.

1. Introduction

The migration of unaccompanied minors is a complex and constantly evolving phenomenon, which has led to a review of the legislative framework as well as the protection and assistance measures in place. In this context, the innovation of practices adopted by social work professionals is crucial, both for the development of the profession and for the life trajectories of young migrants (Campanini, 2015; Di Rosa & Tuminelli, 2024; Giovannetti & Accorinti, 2022; Popescu & Libal, 2018; Raya & López Peláez, 2017). Decisions taken by social work professionals—even within established political frameworks and organisational structures—can shape strategies and procedures, becoming service practices with the potential to influence policy itself (Franzoni & Anconelli, 2021; Lipsky, 2023; Spinelli, 2020). The power to act and to evaluate thus represents, for professionals, the capacity to achieve desired change (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2013; Weiss-Gal, 2017). This capacity becomes even more generative when it includes the perspectives of beneficiaries (Arcidiacono et al., 1996; Barnes, 1999; Faccioli et al., 2007; George & Pignaris, 2020), from the construction of support pathways to the formulation of policy.

Social inclusion—understood as a micro, meso, and macro relational process—requires that the conditions for effective migrant participation in host societies are established. Multidimensional pathways based on mutual respect for ethnocultural diversity are therefore essential, generating a two-way dynamic (Ambrosini, 2008) between those who welcome and those who are welcomed, and producing a shared transformation in terms of identity and belonging (Di Rosa, 2022).

Social services are both the site and the object of this potential mutual transformation: as spaces for rethinking organisational structures and practices from a transcultural perspective (Jabbar, 2002); for cultivating specific professional skills (Cohen-Emerique, 2017); for community-based work (Allegri, 2015); and for including beneficiaries in the design and evaluation of policies and services (Tomei, 2004).

It was within this perspective that the *Global-ANSWER* Project was created, with the aim of identifying, analysing, and disseminating good practices in the field of social work and human mobility in Spain, Italy, and Sweden. The Project promotes international and intersectoral collaboration among Network members and develops research and training activities that involve universities, municipalities, and third-sector organisations.

The establishment of the Network, and the exchange of skills and knowledge among its members, aims to promote good practices identified in local governance and social work interventions. In doing so, the Network aligns with the objectives of the European Union in building inclusive societies founded on values of solidarity, social justice, and human rights, consistent with the principles and values of social work as both an academic discipline and a professional practice.

As part of this broader initiative, the *Global-ANSWER* Project contributes by conducting research focused on social service practices with unaccompanied foreign minors in Italy. The case study examines the most widely implemented social service practices in Italy since the adoption of Law No. 47/2017—on protection measures for unaccompanied minors— (*Legge 7 aprile 2017, n. 47*), identifying the characteristics that qualify them as “good practices” from an integrated perspective that considers both professionals and beneficiaries.

In this paper, we present the findings of the analysis of narrative interviews, integrating the perspectives of professionals and young adults who arrived as unaccompanied minors, with a view to identifying the common characteristics that allow us to define practices as “good.” We also address two themes that emerged as significant for both groups: the role of recognition in helping relationships, and the need to better structure practices that support young migrants in their transition to adulthood.

1.1. Italian Regulation and Organizational Structure of Social Services for Unaccompanied Foreign Minors

In recent years, legislation concerning unaccompanied minors in Italy has undergone significant changes in response to their increasing presence among migrants. As of 31 December 2024, there were 18,625 unaccompanied foreign minors (UAMs) registered in Italy. The majority are male (88.4%), with most aged 17 (56.8%), followed by those aged 16 (21%) and between 7 and 14 years old (13.7%). They come primarily from Egypt (20.4%), Ukraine (18.8%), Gambia (11.7%), Tunisia (9.6%), and Guinea (8.1%). The Italian regions hosting the largest numbers are Sicily (29.1%), Lombardy (13.1%), Campania (8.5%), and Emilia-Romagna (7.7%).

Examining the historical trend between 2021 and 2023, the number of UAMs almost tripled: the average was 8,216 in 2021, approximately 16,000 in 2022, and around 22,000 in 2023. In 2024, however, this trend reversed, with a slight but steady decline.

Nevertheless, in absolute terms, the average number of UAMs hosted in Italy during 2024 still exceeded 20,000 (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2024).

Legislative Decree No. 142 of 2015 (*Decreto legislativo 18 agosto 2015, n.142*) introduced specific rules for reception, excluding unaccompanied minors from repatriation detention centres and providing for age assessment procedures based on interviews and, where necessary, social and health examinations.

The principal provisions are contained in the Consolidated Immigration Act (Legislative Decree No. 286/1998 [*Decreto legislativo 25 luglio 1998, n.286*]) and in various decrees regulating reception and international protection. Law No. 47 of 2017, commonly known as the “Zampa Law,” enhanced protection for unaccompanied minors by granting them rights equivalent to those of Italian children. This law prohibits pushbacks at the border and restricts expulsions, introducing the appointment of a guardian for each unaccompanied minor and a standard protocol for age assessment.

The reception system is structured to ensure that placement in non-governmental facilities and CAS centres for minors is residual and temporary. On the orders of social services, unaccompanied minors are placed in facilities capable of guaranteeing adequate living conditions, or in government-run first reception centres. From there, they must be transferred within one month to a second-level facility within the “Integration Reception System” (SAI). Here they receive immediate assistance and information on their rights, including the possibility of applying for international protection. Identification procedures must be completed within ten days, and the maximum stay is thirty days. Furthermore, unaccompanied minors may access SAI services even without submitting an asylum application.

Within the SAI, reception is extended, and facilities must be adequate to accommodate the number of minors present. Where such facilities are unavailable, municipalities may provide temporary assistance, and Prefects may activate emergency reception centres in the event of mass arrivals.

With regard to residence permits, Law No. 47/2017 provides that, in the event of a prohibition on pushbacks, permits may be issued for minors or for family reasons, valid until the age of majority. Thereafter, unaccompanied minors may apply for study or work permits, provided they are involved in social integration projects. Support may extend up to the age of 21 for those requiring assistance to achieve autonomy. The law guarantees

access to healthcare and education regardless of legal status and includes protection measures for minors who are victims of trafficking.

2. Methods

The methodological framework is characterised by the challenge of defining good practice through a process co-constructed by the actors involved.

In line with the collaborative research approach (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995) adopted in the European Project, this case study seeks to encourage the participation of both professionals and migrants in a reflective process that takes account of their differing degrees of power and access to resources. This approach is grounded in the idea of building interventions in which groups of people work together to bring about changes in their social and professional contexts. Collaboration is thus conceived as members of organisations and communities working with one another, and with researchers, to examine and develop their work and their contexts (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014).

Capturing the perspectives of both professionals and beneficiaries through narrative interviews makes it possible to identify which aspects of the support process were perceived as effective and therefore “good” for each participant. Thematic analysis then allowed the identification of common characteristics attributable to the dimensions defined by the European Network (Gijón et al., 2023). Additional qualitative and quantitative techniques employed in the broader case study (documentary analysis, literature review, survey, focus group) contributed to completing the overall picture of practices, and facilitated consensus on which aspects required change and which should be preserved.

2.1. Contact methods of the interviewees and topics of the interview outline

Within the framework outlined, interviewees—social workers and young adults formerly unaccompanied—were contacted in two ways: in some cases, through consent to an in-depth interview given in response to a previously administered online survey; in others, through the mediation of social workers already interviewed and of the National Care Leavers Network.

After being informed of the aims of both the wider European project and the national case study, and once written informed consent had been obtained, fourteen interviews were conducted: seven with social workers and seven with unaccompanied foreign minors. All interviews were audio-recorded and analysed using the qualitative analysis software *Atlas.ti*.

Interview guides were designed for both profiles involved, using as a cross-cutting reference the analytical dimensions of “good practice” defined by the *Global-ANSWER* Network (Gijón et al., 2023).

Social workers were asked to present their professional background, to describe practices and methodologies now established in their services for working with unaccompanied minors, and to report on any particularly significant projects. Attention was also given to the role of local communities and to elements of public policy perceived as obstacles to their work, including funding sources. In addition, they were invited to describe the organisational structure in which they work in relation to opportunities for training, supervision, research, and evaluation on issues of human mobility. Finally, the topic of social innovation was explored, focusing on the elements that, from their perspective, make a practice innovative in relation to the profiles of the unaccompanied minors encountered during their careers.

Young migrants were asked to provide a free self-introduction and to describe their first meeting with a social worker and the relationship that developed over time, including any projects of particular significance in their migration journey. To identify elements of social work practice considered “good,” they were invited to recount an episode in which they felt especially supported by a professional, as well as one in which the helping relationship was less positive. They were also asked to share suggestions they would offer a social worker, based on their own experience. Finally, they were asked how they feel in the local community where they now live and what plans they have for the future.

In both cases, the questions were designed to elicit personal accounts of experiences during reception and support, and to stimulate deeper reflection on the structural and interactional elements that did—or did not—function effectively.

2.2. Theoretical dimensions for the analysis of good practices

The *Global-ANSWER* Project is founded on the belief that social work professionals must reflect on their role, emotional awareness, and potential biases in

order to work according to a transformative approach that engages all actors involved (Allegri, 2023; Gijón et al., 2023; Gui, 2018; Schön, 1993; Sicora, 2021).

The dimensions used to define good practice, co-developed by the *Global-ANSWER* Network (Gijón et al., 2023), include: the internal and external coherence of practices, ensuring that they are relevant, necessary, informed, and requested by the subjects of social intervention (Kabeer, 1998); awareness, or the practical ability to adopt a non-racist and non-ethnocentric theoretical-methodological approach that recognises the experiences and needs of migrants and remains consistent with ethical principles and human rights (Martín-Estalayo, 2023); reflexivity, understood as the capacity of practice to incorporate actions based on reflective dialogue between professional subjectivity, theories, and public policies (D'Cruz et al., 2007; Keller & Lehman, 1991); and sustainability, defined as the ability to achieve stated objectives by activating stable processes of social transformation (Øyen, 2002; Newbigging & Thomas, 2010).

These dimensions, the result of joint work by social workers from both the public and third sectors together with academic scholars, demonstrate that a practice can be considered “good” when it promotes well - being in terms of respecting people’s rights and wishes, and when it is effective in meeting objectives and requirements related to human rights and professional ethics, from an intersectional and gender - sensitive perspective (Dominelli & Macleod, 1999).

In the context of social work with migrants and young migrants, a central role is played by reception, social and community inclusion, and by the degree of involvement of migrants themselves (Gijón et al., 2023).

In this paper we seek to explore the themes on which there is convergence between professionals and migrants, how these align with the analytical dimensions of good practice identified by the *Global-ANSWER* Network (Gijón et al., 2023), and the terms in which they can be synthesised into an integrated definition that incorporates both perspectives.

3. Results

This section presents the profiles and key themes that emerged from the interviews with unaccompanied young adults (n=7) and social workers (n=7). It also summarises several themes that proved significant in relation to the dimensions of good practice

defined by the *Global-ANSWER* Network (Gijón et al., 2023). These themes provide defining elements of good practice based on the combination of the perspectives of social workers and young adults formerly unaccompanied.

3.1. Profiles and positionings of the interviewees

The profile of the unaccompanied young adults interviewed consists of individuals aged between 18 and 23, predominantly male. Most reside in the municipality of Catania and are members of the National Care Leavers Network. Some live in shared apartments with peers; one remains in a reception community for minors; and other lives with a family that has continued to host him informally, outside a formal foster care arrangement.

The social workers interviewed are mostly aged between 35 and 55, with over five years of professional experience, and primarily employed within public administration. However, their territorial affiliations vary (Sicily, Puglia, Marche, Piedmont).

From the young adults' perspective, narratives begin with references to their migratory journey: arrival in Italy is considered the start of their integration process, strongly shaped by the psychological and emotional impact of the journey itself. The quality of the welcome provided by professionals is therefore perceived as crucial. Educators play an important role in sharing everyday life, helping to build meaningful and intimate relationships. Guardians are also key in terms of protection, although their presence and effectiveness vary greatly: some were experienced as supportive and engaged, while others were barely known. The social worker's role also varies depending on their presence within reception facilities or local authorities, and on their physical and spatial accessibility. Where accessibility was high, opportunities for contact and time together enabled relationships of trust in which professionals became reliable references for information, guidance, and the translation of life projects into reality. Where accessibility was low, professionals were perceived as almost absent, sometimes appearing only at the start of reception and again at the age of majority. Several young adults observed that municipal social workers are responsible for an unmanageable number of cases, limiting the possibility of meaningful support.

Beyond professional relationships, interviewees particularly valued activities that enabled them to learn, understand, and experiment: acquiring the Italian language and communication skills; learning about enforceable rights and service rules; participating in sports, recreational, educational, training, and work activities; and experiencing local

social life. Such opportunities foster aspirations for autonomy and self-fulfilment, often expressed in efforts to find work, continue studies, and support families of origin. However, a recurring challenge is the difficulty of balancing work and study.

Young migrants also reflected on how relationships with local communities influenced their integration experience, sometimes shaping the decision to remain in Italy or to move elsewhere in Europe. Several reported experiences of racism or discrimination, underlining the need for awareness-raising in host communities.

They also offered concrete suggestions for improving reception services: greater empathy despite organisational constraints; more effective intercultural communication, particularly through cultural-linguistic mediators; greater attention to the personal circumstances of each young person and to their active participation in support projects; and more continuous, less fragmented assistance during the transition to adulthood.

From the social workers' perspective, systemic challenges in supporting unaccompanied minors were emphasised: lengthy bureaucratic procedures for regularising legal status; insufficient financial and human resources compared to demand; and difficulties in accompanying minors during their transition to adult life.

Social workers highlighted the need for holistic support encompassing health, education, legal assistance, social integration, and preparation for adult life. Collaboration with different actors—especially schools, health services, and third-sector organisations—was considered essential.

The role of social workers was recognised as central, both in terms of administrative case management and in building support networks, as well as in direct relationships with minors. At the same time, interviewees stressed that this role must be understood and enacted within a network dimension, without which the holistic, systemic approach cannot be realised. They also acknowledged the need for continuous professional training and supervision, particularly in cultural-linguistic and legal competence, and in recognising and addressing trauma.

From the perspective of young migrants, the key elements of good practice are: 1) in the initial reception phase: the presence and accessibility of reference figures, and clear information about their situation, fostering security and understanding of status; 2) in the second reception phase and the transition to independence: feeling personally recognised by reference figures, participating actively in community life, engaging in age-

appropriate activities, and having time and space for reflection guided by professionals—factors that nurture aspirations.

From the social workers' perspective, good practice is substantiated by: 1) organisational and policy stability, enabling holistic, multidisciplinary, network-based work; 2) adequate time and space for reflection, including opportunities for shared professional dialogue, training, and supervision. Notably, social workers' narratives referred more often to organisational aspects than to direct relationships with minors.

3.2. *A continuous practice*

Both professionals and young migrants highlighted continuity as a defining element of good practice. For social workers, organisational stability and systematic networking are essential; for young migrants, the presence and accessibility of reference figures are paramount. Both aspects can be traced back to the dimension of continuity: a practice must be relevant, necessary, informed, and requested by those who are the subjects of social intervention (Kabeer, 1998). For both groups, organisational and human resource instability can hinder the quality of practice.

"(...) We have established a series of agreements at a local level ... there has been a path of constant and continuous growth that has led us to demand certain reception standards from the host communities and then there has also been a sideline work with schools, prefectures, health companies, through continuous meetings ... shared solutions have been found on how to give access to everyone ... They have been years of hard work in the network, of strengthening the administrative framework. ... We have tried to define the quality of reception and to homogenize reception practices to ensure that the minor has the same reception regardless of the place of placement (...)" [A.B. – social worker]

"(...) The fewer people there are, the more tiring the work becomes... it seems to me that there are few people working and instead there are many of us. I don't know how it works, but I think there is a lack, there are no people to work, maybe because there are no places or because there is no money, I don't know (...)." [K.J. – unaccompanied foreign young adult]

Continuity is therefore experienced when practices are conceived within the wider system of services of a given territory, interconnected with all other services and actors,

and structured in such a way that rights are guaranteed consistently, regardless of placement.

3.3. A decolonised practice

Social workers emphasised the need to adopt an approach that is both holistic and systemic, while unaccompanied minors highlighted the importance of having sufficient time and space to understand both the system's rules and their own personal situation. These aspects relate to the dimension of a decolonised practice: the ability to adopt a non-racist and non-ethnocentric theoretical–methodological approach that recognises the experiences and needs of migrants, and that remains consistent with ethical principles and human rights (Martín-Estalayo, 2023).

“(...) There are some kids who go to the social worker and these kids don't understand Italian well, in fact they don't even speak Italian ...There is this problem that social workers don't ask the kids if they understand. I always say ... 'before speaking you have to know if the kid understands or not'. I've seen kids who say "yes, no, yes, no" ... This hurts me when a kid doesn't understand and responds anyway, I've always said it to many kids: 'if you don't understand you have to say "I didn't understand" that is better than you say yes or no' (...).”
[B.D. – unaccompanied foreign young adult]

“(...) When they arrive, maybe they don't understand, they need to have time to understand a little about the community context and we need to have time to take charge globally. ... The differences between the community social worker and the municipal social worker are explained and it's not something they understand right away, it's something they understand over time, because initially there isn't this division in their mind, so then over time they understand the difference between the various institutions and the various and various services. This is why networking, and a systemic approach are important. There is support between me and the other social workers who work in the third sector (...).” [E.P. – social worker]

For both professionals and young people, it is crucial never to take communication for granted. The consistent presence of cultural – linguistic mediators is considered indispensable, as it is the need to share every step of the decision-making process that shapes the life trajectories of unaccompanied minors.

3.4. *Circularity of practice with theory*

The dimension of circularity between practice and theory—understood as the ability to incorporate actions based on reflective dialogue between professional subjectivity, theoretical frameworks, and public policies (D’Cruz et al., 2007; Keller & Lehman, 1991)—was identified as a critical element of good practice.

For professionals, this dimension relates to the recognition that ongoing training and supervision are essential. For young migrants, it corresponds to the need—often unmet—to feel that they are genuinely involved in the work of social workers, rather than only encountering them at crucial stages of their journey.

“(...) Unfortunately, in this last period we have not done supervision due to a problem of personnel resources in the cooperative. We usually have a figure external to the team and we carve out moments between us on the various paths of the kids and on our work ... it is an exchange of what we do, of our activities, of our realities (...).” [B.G. – social worker]

“(...) I needed many explanations, to know where I am, to know what I can do to improve my life, to know what I am obliged to do being a minor, to go to school for example. ...But my social worker and I only met once, when she took me in, when she asked me my name and where I was from and told me she was my social worker, but after that I never saw her again (...).” [J.O. – unaccompanied foreign young adult]

From both perspectives, practice is considered “good” when the beneficiaries’ viewpoints are structurally incorporated into procedures—for example, through the direct participation of unaccompanied minors in the multi-professional teams that make decisions concerning them.

3.5. *A prevention-oriented practice*

The dimension of a prevention-oriented practice refers to the ability to achieve proposed objectives by activating stable processes of social transformation (Øyen, 2002; Newbigging & Thomas, 2010). Both professionals and young migrants perceive this dimension as being fulfilled when support processes, projects, and activities are designed with community life in mind. Similarly, when services and professionals are well-known, deeply embedded, and integrated into local communities, the pathway of the

minor becomes part of the everyday life of the place, to the point of fostering independence from services themselves.

“(...) I've been in Catania for almost half my life and I'm very happy, it's become a home for me. At first, I didn't feel good, I saw some episodes of racism, but in the end, I got used to it, before I didn't know how to answer because my Italian was poor. Before I didn't know what to do, where to walk, now I know the areas, the neighborhood ... Now I intend to enroll in university again, but it won't be here. For now, I'm working really hard to save up money so that I can go to my relatives in Spain, Germany or California (...).” [M.G. – unaccompanied foreign young adult]

“(...) We try to invest more seriously and systematically in the work orientation action and in the search for housing for those young people who become adults or are about to become adults. There are some young people who manage to do it but many others do not. And if there is no possibility for them to always keep them welcomed in second level projects, it happens that these young people become homeless in the city. We see this with deep regret (...).” [F.L. – social worker]

In summary, the essential elements that allow social work practices with UASC to be defined as “good”—from an integrated perspective between professionals and beneficiaries—are: the presence and accessibility of formal reference figures for implementing support projects, despite the organisational instability of local service systems; the time and space devoted to explanation, dialogue, and shared reflection; and the opportunity to live an everyday community life in the places where young migrants are settled. According to both groups, a practice is “good” when it enables professionals and beneficiaries to meet and spend time together to clarify, understand, and give meaning to experiences beyond the service, embedded within the community.

4. Discussion

In light of the themes presented—continuity, decolonisation, circularity, and prevention—social work is increasingly called upon to strengthen community-based practice as a core dimension of its professional identity (Sarri & Sarri, 1993). This involves promoting and implementing practices of citizenship and democratic

coexistence, oriented towards working outside services and within communities, from an intersectoral and interdisciplinary perspective (Moro, 1998; Ripamonti, 2018). It also requires investment in policy practices with the direct and active participation of beneficiaries and groups at risk of marginalisation (Dominelli, 2005), and the decolonisation of learning processes as a prerequisite for incorporating beneficiaries' perspectives (Di Rosa & Tuminelli, 2024; Favarò & Marcenò, 2020; Garrett, 2024; Rowe et al., 2015).

Each of these themes engages directly with the analytical dimensions of the *Global-ANSWER* Network: coherence, awareness, reflexivity, and sustainability of practice (Gijón et al., 2023). Continuity resonates with the internal and external coherence of practice, as helping processes increasingly require clarity about what is happening and what can be sustained into the future, informed by listening to and engaging with beneficiaries. Decolonisation aligns with awareness, understood as the capacity to challenge and transform established ways of thinking or, at the very least, to open them to new possibilities. Circularity between theory and practice is closely linked to reflexivity, which itself is intrinsically related to decolonisation: if practice is consistently guided by listening to others' perspectives and integrated with theoretical development, then decolonised theories will, in turn, inform future practice. Finally, prevention connects directly to sustainability, as transformation requires moving beyond the immediate resolution of urgent problems towards building conditions that will guide future practice according to enduring principles and approaches.

With respect to community - based work, professionals reported greater structure and stability in networking with diverse actors and organisations, despite the complexity and unpredictability of young people's life paths. Particular attention must be paid to the role of voluntary guardians, which remains unmonitored and potentially unstable, and insufficiently integrated into processes underpinning good social work practice. From the perspective of young people, there is less perceived instability in transitioning from the protection system available during minority to the one encountered upon reaching adulthood. They are familiar with service networks and have built informal social relationships thanks to organisational projects that extend beyond formal services.

In terms of citizenship and democratic practices, newly adult participants considered being informed about service functioning, access rules, and rights to be of utmost importance. Such knowledge enables them to form realistic expectations about the different roles played by professionals within various services. Professionals, in turn,

highlighted their need for specialised training and supervision, both in relation to the content of migration phenomena and the specific functions of their role depending on their service context, in order to hold a clear mandate and communicate it consistently to young people.

Finally, the decolonisation of knowledge emerges as a central and transversal element across all themes identified in the analysis.

The topics addressed are closely connected to the major concepts of reception and social integration—concepts that have predominantly been theorised from the epistemological standpoint of policy scholars, service experts, and professionals (Favarò & Marcenò, 2020; Lacomba, 2020).

The growing use of participatory and collaborative research approaches is especially valuable for embedding beneficiaries' perspectives in practice, not only in planning and evaluation but also in the theoretical elaboration and understanding of phenomena (Tarsia, 2023). What must be stressed in discussing these elements is the need never to exclude the viewpoints of service recipients. These are not only a vital source of social innovation and essential to their right to representation in shaping services and policies (De Ambrogio, 1999; Giarelli, 2002), but also a resource that professionals can incorporate into their own practice as a means of professional growth.

Involving beneficiaries in the co-construction and evaluation of services is not merely a strategy to increase their sense of involvement—risking, otherwise, a continued ethnocentric “care-taking” perspective. It also functions as a means of completing the work of professionals, who, by moving closer to others, gain a deeper understanding of their own professional identity and are thus able to renew themselves (Cassano, 1989; Jabbar, 2002).

5. Conclusions

On the one hand, the coherence and sustainability of the practices described converge on the idea of the systemic nature of social work, understood in terms of networking and community-based engagement with unaccompanied minors, with an emphasis on continuity in the helping process. This underscores the importance of accompanying minors, particularly during the transition from childhood to adulthood.

On the other hand, the awareness and reflexivity evident in the practices described highlight the need to acquire knowledge in order to understand the world of others—in terms of culture, organisation, modes of communication, and patterns of behaviour. Such awareness constitutes an essential lever for clarifying the boundaries of one's role and scope of action, and for fully exercising the potential to develop one's identity and profession within a given context.

Despite the limitations of this case study—such as the relatively small number of participants, the predominance of professionals employed in public administration, and the focus on unaccompanied young adults predominantly male and residing in Southern Italy—we believe this contribution adds to the voices affirming that social inclusion should be understood not only as a process but also as a condition. That is, as a structural interdependence between migrants and native populations within a given territory (Di Rosa, 2023; Sciortino, 2015), achieved through practices built on participatory approaches.

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