

**Master thesis : "Actors, agency and coping mechanism. How school personnel, shelter workers and guardians shape unaccompanied minors educational career"**

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## Mémoire de fin d'études

Actors' agency and coping mechanism.  
How school personnel, shelter workers and guardians shape  
unaccompanied minors educational career.

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# Aknowledgment

Climbing a mountain. This is the first image that comes in my mind while thinking about this thesis. It has been a long (and to some extent difficult journey). Like a rockie climber I approached this adventure with apprehension, but with a great desire to do. Unaware of the difficulties that awaited me. Some unforeseen events postponed the beginning of the journey. When it finally started, I hit the ground running trying to make up for lost time. In hindsight, I realize that it was not a good idea: I reached the top of the climb without the necessary energies to complete it as I wanted to. The obstacle faced during the journey and the fatigue cumulated during and before it have been felt, unfortunately.

Luckely for me, as any professional climber, I had my sherpas by my side. These incredible people who, thanks to their abilities, strength and resilience, make climbs possible. Often climbers take all the credit for results achieved, leaving sherpas in the shadow. I don't want to make the same mistake. if I have completed the climb, I owe it mainly to them.

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Lastly, I would like to spend a words for the future me. This climb has not been the one you wanted. You have reached a lot, but not the highest, most desired peak. I hope you'll learn to be gentle with yourself. As they say, the beauty of the journey is not the destination, but the journey itself. And the view, peak, whichever you achieved, is still a peak. *A dunca si rrivatu a misu u zippu*, knowing you gave all what you had.

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**List of Acronyms**

API	application for international protection
ATF	<i>association tuteurs francophones</i> , French-speaking guardians association
CFWB	<i>Communauté Française Wallonie-Bruxelles</i> , French Community Wallonia-Brussels
COCOF	<i>Commission Communautaire Française de la Région de Bruxelles-Capitale</i> , French Community Commission for the Brussels-Capital Region
CPMS	<i>centres psycho-médico-sociaux</i> , psycho-medico-social centres
DASPA	<i>dispositif d'Accueil et de Scolarisation des élèves Primo-Arrivants</i> , Reception and schooling system for newly arrived students
DBSO	<i>deeltijds beroepssecundair onderwijs</i> , part-time vocational secondary education
FLE	<i>français langue étrangère</i> , French foreign language
ILA	<i>Initiative locale d'accueil</i> , local reception initiative
MENA	<i>mineur étranger non-accompagné</i> , unaccompanied foreign minor
OKAN	<i>onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige kinderen</i> , reception education for foreign-language children
OOC	orientation and observation centre
OP	organizing power
SESO	<i>service social des solidarités</i> , solidarity social service
SLB	street-level bureaucrat
UFM	unaccompanied foreign minor
VGC	<i>Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie</i> , Flemish community commission

## 1. Introduction

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of August 1999, Belgium was shocked by the discovery of two boys, Yaguine Koïta and Fodé Tounkara, who froze to death on an airplane flying from Conakry to Brussels. Their bodies were found in the airplane's rear right-hand wheel bay at Brussels International Airport. Yaguine and Fodé were just two boys who quit their country (Guinea) with a dream: coming to Europe to seek a better life and more possibilities<sup>1</sup>. Just like them, other minors arrive in Europe daily in search of a dream or an opportunity, the so-called *unaccompanied foreign minors* (UFMs), or MENAs (in French). In Belgium, an average of more than 600 unaccompanied minors are reported each month and, in the first six months of 2024, 1883 reports were forwarded to the Guardianship Service (Guardianship Service, 2024). The total number of unaccompanied foreign minors currently living in Belgium is unknown. However, in 2023, 3638 guardianships for such minors were in place, the highest ever recorded (Guardianship Service, 2023).

The difficulties that these unaccompanied persons face all along their migratory route, coupled with their status of minors, constitute high-risk factors that make this group a particularly vulnerable one. Due to the specificities of their situation, unaccompanied foreigner minors (UFMs, MENAs in French) receive special attention. Upon their arrival in Belgium, they are channelled towards a path seeking the establishment of a “sustainable solution” - in other words, a life project aiming at their eventual independence. A crucial aspect of this path is represented by education. Despite that, unaccompanied minors’ educational careers are dotted with obstacles and often unsuccessful. Indeed, as stated by Sensi, “as soon as they arrive in Belgium, MENAs are thrust into a world of compulsory schooling, of which they know nothing, often not even the language. They have to find within themselves the ability to adapt, despite their experiences, despite possible traumas, despite the asylum procedure, despite not understanding what is going on around them. This is why, for them, school is all too often just another crossing on the road to exile rather than real integration” (2011:65).

The reasons behind unaccompanied minors’ difficult educational careers are manifold. First, as with all foreigner students, MENAs’ educational outcomes are affected by many different factors. This includes, among others: the early tracking system used in schools (Danhier & Martin, 2014; Heckmann, 2008; Jacob et al, 2007; Jacob 2012); minors’ socio-economic characteristics (Jacobs & Rea, 2011; Marks, 2005); their language proficiency (Delvaux, 2011; Jacobs, Rea & Hanquinet, 2007; Jacobs et al, 2009; Jacobs & Rea, 2011); social capital (Behtoui & Neergaard, 2016; Dufur et al, 2013; Israel et al, 2011); and their teachers’ expectations (Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010; Van Houtte, 2014).

Nevertheless, these factors are not sufficient to fully explain unaccompanied minors’ educational pathways, as they overlook an important source of influence which is particularly relevant for the specific case of unaccompanied foreigner minors. The vulnerability inherent in their condition exposes

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<sup>1</sup> Here the full letter the boys carried with them on their travel. <https://iday.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Message-Yaguine-et-Fode%CC%81-EN.pdf>. Last accessed: 11-07-2024

them to the influences of decisions made by the different actors around them. In other words, MENAs' educational careers are influenced by the decisions and agency of the people with whom they are in contact. This primarily includes their legal guardians, the workers of the shelters in which MENAs live, as well as the personnel of the schools in which they are enrolled, among others. However, despite their role, few studies have examined so far how these different actors and their agency influence unaccompanied minors' educational careers (Rigoni, 2023; Mendonça & Rigoni, 2020; Pantić et al, 2015).

This thesis contributes to the literature that seeks to fill this research gap. In doing so, it addresses the following research question: *How do shelters, schools and guardians shape unaccompanied minors' educational careers?* In the framework of this study, shelters and schools should be understood both as an institution but also (and foremost), as a heterogeneous group of individual actors. Indeed, it is assumed that shelter workers, school personnel and guardians act as street-level bureaucrats. In other words, they are considered to be service providers who, through their autonomy, discretion and judgment can directly influence unaccompanied minors' educational careers.

To tackle the research question mentioned above, this thesis is based on qualitative-based research including 27 interviews conducted with shelter personnel, teachers, educators and guardians. The qualitative analysis of these interviews sheds light on how the coping strategies developed by the aforementioned actors can influence, both positively and negatively, unaccompanied minors' educational achievements. In particular, attention is focused on two transition phases of minors' educational careers, namely their school enrolment (including both school selection and enrolment) and their orientation post-DASPA/OKAN classes (i.e., reception classes for newly arrived migrant students. These classes seek to prepare students to join the Belgian educational system. (The main features related to these classes will be presented later).

The geographical scope of the research was restricted to Brussels, for several reasons. Firstly, this choice was due to the high concentration in the Belgian capital of second-phase shelters for minors (four), schools organising DASPA classes (24 in total in 2024) and OKAN classes (four in 2024), and also two guardianship associations. Secondly, the fact that Brussels is a bilingual city allowed me to include in the sample both French and Dutch-speaking schools, which further enriched my understanding of the impact of specific educational systems on the agency of the school personnel. Thirdly, the relatively narrow geographical area has made it possible to study the relations amongst the different actors examined. In particular, I seek to investigate the nature of these relations, that is, if they are formalised and structured in an organic network or remain mainly informal and depending on each actors' agency and will.

By examining these interconnected aspects, this thesis therefore aims to make both a theoretical and an empirical contribution to the literature on the topic. Theoretically, few articles have studied unaccompanied minors' educational careers (see Lemaire, 2009; Mendonça Dias & Rigoni, 2020; Rigoni



2023; Rigoni & Crenn, 2020; Sensi 2011). Using these studies as a starting point, this thesis aims to further develop our conceptual understanding of specific factors shaping unaccompanied minors' educational careers by focusing on an actors-based analytical approach – specifically the role of schools, shelters and guardians. In addition, the empirical contribution of this study derives from the fact that it provides first-hand data on the Belgian situation, where the topic has not been sufficiently explored so far.

The rest of the thesis is structured as follows: the next section provides an overview of the literature on migrants' educational outcomes. In order to grasp the complexity of factors shaping UFM's educational careers, the theoretical framework for this thesis is inspired by different elements from two scholarly approaches: a) Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological model of human development and b) the street-level bureaucracy (SLB) theory. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) socio-ecological framework posits that human development is the result of complex interaction between the developing individual and his/her ecological environment, that is, a nested arrangement of structures (individual, micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-system). Adapting Bronfenbrenner's socio-ecological framework allows us to analyse migrants' educational careers as the results of individual student characteristics and the results of all interactions between the person and his/her ecological environment (the so-called micro and meso-system), the larger social context in which such relations are embedded (exo- and macro-system). The discussion on micro and meso-system will be further developed by an overview of the scholarship literature on street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) with a specific focus on coping mechanisms and network effect. Combining these two different theoretical approaches allows us to conceptually grasp the complex role of actors in UFM's educational careers, as each model provides interesting insights about the roles and strategies developed by these actors.

The third section then provides a contextualization of the research topic in the Belgian case, by presenting some data regarding unaccompanied minors in Belgium, the specificities of Brussels and the minors' integration route. Then the methodology employed will be presented. The main results of the analysis are then presented in the last section in which I discuss the impact of each actor before digging, in a second stage, into the impact of actors' networks on MENAs' educational pathways.

In general, my findings indicate that all actors have an impact on UFM's educational careers. Moreover, results show the existence of a hierarchy of influence: school personnel have the greatest influence on MENAs' schooling, given that they are directly involved in it. On the other hand, the impact of guardians appears to be limited. The thesis concludes with a general discussion regarding study limitation and suggestion for future research.

## **2. Theoretical framework: between the socio-ecological model of human development and street-level bureaucracy**

Migrant students and UFM, regardless of their legal status, origins and any other characteristics, tend to have a different educational pathway than their native peers. In particular, migrant students tend to be overrepresented in lower tracks and vocational training (Jacobs et al, al 2009, 2007; Jacobs & Rea 2011; Jacobs, 2012). The reasons behind this trend are manifold and an understanding of the socio-ecological framework of individual development can help explain the complexity of it.

According to the Bronfenbrenner (1977), human development is the result of the interactions between a growing individual and his/her ecological environment, “a nested arrangement of structures, each contained within the next” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977:514). In other terms, the ecological environment represents the complexity of relations influencing the individual’s development. Bronfenbrenner’s model is composed of five nested systems:

- a) *the individual system* refers to pupils’ personal characteristics. Thereby, translating it to UFM’s schooling, individual system refers to the pupil’s individual characteristics, such as language proficiency and socio-economic characteristics.
- b) *the micro-system* encompasses the relations between the individual and his/her immediate setting, namely the environment in which the person engages in particular activities of a particular role (e.g., family, school, workplace, among others). These micro-system relations should be evaluated not only in terms of process (i.e., mode of interactions and individual behaviour), but also, more importantly, as an activity, that is, actors’ agency (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).  
Applying it to minors’ educational careers, micro-system includes peer effects, pupil-teacher relations, teachers’ expectations (behaviours), residential accommodation (Aleghfeli & Hunt, 2022), and also the respective agency of school personnel, shelter workers and guardians.
- c) *the meso-system* defines the interrelations among settings as “a system of microsystems” (Bronfenbrenner 1977:515). Hence, in this study, the meso-system includes the relations between the different actors (schools, guardians and shelters) involved in minors’ reception, education and integration pathways.
- d) *the exo-system* refers to the social structures, both formal and informal, which may directly influence a person. “These structures include the major institutions of the society, both deliberately structured and spontaneously evolving, as they operate at a concrete local level” (Bronfenbrenner, 1977:515). Adapting this concept to MENAs’ education, exo-system refers to the educational system, including tracks and reception classes.
- e) *the macro-system* refers to overarching social, cultural, economic and legal systems, of which micro-meso- and exo-system are the manifestation. Macro-system, thus, include immigration laws, cultural barriers and racism which may influence UFM’s educational career. Despite those factors influence UFM’s educational career, they will not be further discussed, being the focus of this study on actors agency.

As previously mentioned, the aim of this study is to analyse how shelters, schools and guardians shape a UFM's educational career. Therefore, the study puts a particular emphasis on analysing the micro and meso-level of UFM educational ecological framework, which will be further explained below. Moreover, considering that these actors have an impact on other factors influencing pupils' educational achievement (such as language proficiency), it seems important to briefly review the existing research on the topic, with a specific focus on research regarding the Belgian context. Although this research focuses on the educational career of unaccompanied foreign minors, most of the studies which will be further presented do not directly target this specific group. Indeed, there is a lack of research focusing on MENAs' educational careers. Nevertheless, it is still possible to draw some lessons and indications from these.

### **2.1. The micro-system: actors' agency and street-level bureaucracy**

Building on Bronfenbrenner's model, the micro-system factors can be divided into behavioural aspects (school staff, teacher expectation, Pygmalion effect) and actors' agency. In the following sub-section, I first discuss the behavioural aspect, before examining actors' agency.

School staff culture may influence pupils' achievement through socialization process and expectation (Van Houtte, 2004). Pupils are in part socialized by the school staff, with the latter being considered to act as a normative group for pupils (Van Houtte 2004). Kemper defines a reference group as "a group, collectivity, or person which the actor takes into account in some manner in the course of selecting a behaviour from among a set of alternatives, or in making a judgment about a problematic issue. A reference group helps to orient the actor in a certain course, whether of action or attitude (1968:32). The reference group is defined as a group or collective providing the actors (in this case, pupils) with a guide of norms and values (*Ibid*). Acting as a normative group, the school staff may determine standards and values that pupils should adhere to, thus directly influencing not only pupils' motivation (value of achievement), but also the achievement standards that pupils should stick to. The levels of those standards are directly related to the expectations that teachers have of pupils. Teachers' expectations (also known as the Pygmalion effect) directly influence pupils' educational progress. In this respect, Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) conducted a first pioneering (and controversial) study in this respect. The researchers administered a non-verbal intelligence test to Oak School's pupils, explaining to their teachers that the test could highlight pupils more inclined to intellectually bloom in the coming years. Twenty percent of the students were randomly selected (to be the study group) and their teachers informed. At the end of the years, students identified as possible bloomers gained significantly in intellectual capacity compared to the rest of the students. Researchers argue that "one person's expectations of another's behaviour may come to serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. When teachers expected that certain children would show greater intellectual development, those children did show greater intellectual development." (1968:20). Contrary to Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968), Jussim 1989 and Jussim & Eccles (1996) found no evidence of the expectation effect, they conclude that naturally

occurring teacher expectations creating self-fulfilling prophecies and biases in teachers' evaluations of students.

The last factor that will be discussed in this section is peer effect. Empirical research shows that peer effect has a positive impact on educational achievement (Ding & Lehrer, 2007; Entorf & Lauk, 2009; Hanushek et al, 2003; Vardardottir, 2013; Ryabov, 2009). Focusing on such impact, Contini (2013) found that the influence of peers is heterogeneous and related to students' socio-economic characteristics (pupils with lower socio-economic status are slightly negatively affected, while pupils with higher socio-economic resources are positively influenced). Furthermore, Entorf & Lauk (2008) also found that the peer effect positively influences educational outcomes more in differentiated schools than in comprehensive schools.

All the factors mentioned above surely influence UFM's educational careers. Nevertheless, they do not take into account the agency of the actors involved in the process. As claimed by Rigoni, "the issue of access to education, schooling and training lies at the crossroads of the actions of professionals and volunteers working with unaccompanied foreign minors" (2023:91). UFM's educational careers are deeply influenced by actors' agency.

Human agency has been defined as the ability to "intervene in the world", to 'act otherwise', to 'make a difference', to exercise 'some sort of power'" (Giddens, 1984: 14). In other words, agency is defined as a transformative capacity, that is, the capacity of wielding some sort of power with the aim of influencing the pre-existing state. Emirbayer & Mishe point out the temporal aspect of agency. They define it as "the temporally constructed engagement by actors of different structural environments – the temporal-relational contexts of action – which, through the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement, both reproduces and transforms those structures in interactive responses to the problem posed by changing historical situations" (1998:970). Thus, agency is a "choral triad" (Ibid: 975), that is, the result of the dynamic interplay among three elements: (a) iterational, making choices based on past experience and knowledge; (b) projective, acting in the perspective of future trajectories and; (c) practical-evaluative, making actions in responses to emerging dilemmas, demands and ambiguity. Taking an ecological perspective, Biesta & Tedder stress the active feature of agency. According to them, agency is not a form of power that individuals possess, but rather the result of an actor's engagement "with temporal-relational contexts-for-action, not a quality of the actors themselves" (2007:136). In other words, agency is the result of actors' actions by means of an environment. Hence, agency is based on, and influenced by, four core features: (a) intentionality and sense purposes, as agents undertake intentionally actions based on a commitment to an expected outcome (Bundara, 2001); (b) "knowledgeability" of rules and tactics (Giddens, 1984:90), meaning the competences and knowledge required to achieve a goal; (c) actors' autonomy *vis-à-vis* the context in which their action is embedded (Eteläpelto et al, 2013) and; (d) reflexivity about agents' own positionality and social contexts, allowing agents to elaborate alternatives and collaborate with others in order to achieve the expected outcome (Bundara, 2001).

Furthermore, the actors taken into account in this study are not *simple* actors, analysing their influence only through the lens of their agency would be reductive. Indeed, the school personnel, shelter workers and, to a lesser extent, guardians are not only actors, but rather they act as real gatekeepers granting unaccompanied minors access to education. As such, they also act as street-level bureaucrats. The concept of street-level bureaucracy, firstly introduced by Lipsky (1969, 1980), seeks to understand multi-layered policymaking (Hupe et al, 2015). He argues that “public policy is not best understood as made in legislatures or top-floor suites of high-ranking administrators, because in important ways it is actually made in the crowded offices and daily encounters of street-level workers” (Lipsky 1980: xii). In particular, the SLB theory emphasizes the role of front-line workers, shedding light on how the relative autonomy, discretion and judgment of those workers influence citizens’ access to social services and rights (Lipsky, 1980; Brodtkin, 2011; Maynard-Moody & Portillo, 2010).

In particular, he focused on the role of government workers (teachers, judges, policemen among others) and on how their discretionary power influences practices and service providing:

‘The schools, police and welfare departments, lower courts, legal services offices, and other agencies whose workers interact with and have wide discretion over the dispensation of benefits or the allocation of public sanctions’ (Lipsky, 1980: xi).

Street-level bureaucrats are so defined as “public service workers who interact directly with citizens in the course of their jobs, and who have substantial discretion in the execution of their work” (Lipsky, 1980:3). They are characterised by their constant interactions with citizens; the potential impact on citizens with whom they interact and extensive independence and autonomy. “Although he works within a bureaucratic structure, his independence on the job is fairly extensive. One component of this independence is discretion in making decisions; but independence in job performance is not limited to discretion. The attitude and general approach of a Street-level Bureaucrat toward his client may affect his client significantly. These considerations are broader than the term discretion suggests” (*Ibid*). This should not be interpreted as a lack of rules and regulation from above. On the contrary, the SLBs’ work frame is highly regulated in order to grant a sufficient level of service providing standardization. However, discretion is still required. Indeed, SLBs are involved in specific tasks and complex situations which cannot only be limited to restrictive regulations and guidelines. They work in situations which require responses to the human dimension of a situation, that is, in a context requiring sensitive observation and judgement. Lastly, “street-level discretion promotes workers' self-regard and encourages clients to believe that workers hold the key to their well-being. For both workers and clients, maintenance of discretion contributes to the legitimacy of the welfare-service state, although street-level bureaucrats by no means establish the boundaries of state intervention” (Lipsky, 1980:15).

Said otherwise, SLBs are service providers who, through their work and posture, are called upon to interact with service users over whom they possess a certain discretionary power. Indeed, SLBs operate in complex work conditions characterised by: resource scarcity, ambiguous goals and measurements,

calls for advocacy which may be inconsistent with work conditions, and alienation. They sometimes face limitation of resources (lack of time, information and material resources). For instance, overcrowded classrooms prevent teachers giving the personal attention that good teaching requires. SLBs may also lack personal resources such as enough experience or specific training. Furthermore, their agency's goals are often ambiguous. "Is the role of public education to communicate social values, teach basic skills, or meet the needs of employers for a trained work force? Are the goals of public welfare to provide income support or decrease dependency?" (Lipsky, 1980: 40).

SLBs are expected to be more than simple gatekeepers. They are expected to advocate and use their position and knowledge to provide service users with the best treatment within the limits of their service. On the other hand, according to Lipsky, advocacy is incompatible with the structure goals and SLBs need to control and judge users for the purpose of their work. For this reason, SLBs may be subject to alienation, understood as "the extent to which workers are able to express, or need to suppress, their creative and human impulses through work activity negatively influencing their work and engagement" (Lipsky, 2010: 75). Alienation negatively influence SLBs' work outcomes.

Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2000, 2003, 2010, 2012) argue that Lipsky's conception of street-level bureaucrats represents reality only partially. They highlight the existence of two narratives regarding SLBs. The first one stems from academia and similarly to Lipsky, perceives SLBs as state agents. This is based on the premise that SLBs are government workers and, as such, they are in charge of implementing political decisions and plans. Workers are guided by self-interest, seeking to make their work easier, safer and more rewarding.

However, SLBs consider themselves as citizen agents, describing their work "more as judging people and acting on these judgments than as adapting rules to the circumstances of cases. Street-level workers see their jobs as helping the disabled who are deemed worthy, teaching those students who are willing to work or show promise amid hardship or, in the case of the police, protecting the good citizen while getting the "bad guys". Rather than relying on policy to guide so-called discretionary decisions about cases, workers first make judgments about the citizen-client and then turn to policy to help enact or, if negative, to rationalize their judgments" (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2003:18). Therefore, according to this second narrative, SLBs present themselves more as gate-openers rather than gatekeepers, by defending their citizen-oriented posture. Instead of using their discretionary power to serve their personal interests, they use discretion to bend and sometimes break the rules in favour of clients (Maynard-Moody & Musheno 2000, 2003, 2010, 2012). Indeed, facing a mismatch between users' needs and their own resources, SLBs "rather than engaging in discretionary decision making, they practice pragmatic improvisation" (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2012: 519).

## **2.2. Coping mechanisms**

“We can now restate the problem of street-level bureaucracy as follows. Street-level bureaucrats attempt to do a good job in some way. The job, however, is in a sense impossible to do in ideal terms. How is the job to be accomplished with inadequate resources, few controls, indeterminate objectives, and discouraging circumstances?” (Lipsky, 2010:82).

According to Lipsky’s vision, SLBs develop a routine to deal with the complexity of their tasks by adopting their own pattern of simplification whenever the official guidelines are inadequate or contradict their preferences. Routinization acts as a service rationing mechanism by setting up procedures designed to ensure regularity, accountability, and fairness, while also protecting workers from users’ demands for responsiveness. Routines also provide a legitimate excuse for not dealing flexibly, since fairness in a limited sense demands equal treatment. Unresponsiveness and inflexibility reinforce common beliefs already present that bureaucracy is part of the problem rather than the solution, and they further reduce users’ claims for service or assertions of need. In other words, SLBs develop different coping mechanisms to deal with their work environment.

Since Lipsky’s first conception, the field of coping mechanisms has largely evolved. Several researchers have studied copying mechanisms in service provision (e.g. Baviskar & Winter, 2016; Evans, 2013; Maynard & Musheno, 2000, 2003, Nielsen, 2006; Vandermeesheen et al, 2023). Nevertheless, as pointed out by Skinner et al (2003), there is no scholarly consensus over the definition of coping, nor on the categories composing the field. Firstly, because scholars utilise different terms: for instance, Lipsky (1980) defines this mechanism of defence as “coping mechanisms”, Satyamurti (1981) talks about “strategies of survival”, while Evans (2013) refers to the way SLBs approach rules. Secondly because researchers operationalize and categorize coping mechanisms in different (and sometimes inconsistent) ways (Tummer et al, 2015). Reviewing the literature on the topic, Skinner and colleagues found that “in the more than 100 category systems examined for this article, no two included the same set of categories. Some scales relied on as few as two or three categories, and some included 10 times that number. A simple list of category names contains over 400 different labels” (2003: 2016). Thus, “coping” is not a specific behaviour that can be unequivocally observed or reported. Rather, it is an organizational construct used to encompass the myriad actions individuals use to deal with stressful experiences (Skinner et al, 2003: 217).

Retracing the origin of coping mechanism will help to define it. The concept finds its origins in the work of Freud. In his theory, defence is crucial, it referred to the ego’s strategies to counter unpleasant feelings (Tummers et al, 2015). In 1966, inspired by Freud’s work, a new theory has been created on coping. Folkman & Lazarus’s definition of coping is strongly anchored in the cognitive-phenomenological theory of psychological stress. Indeed, they define coping “as the cognitive and behavioural efforts made to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts among them” (1980:223). According to their definition, coping mechanisms can include cynicism and compassion, rule breaking and turnover.

Combining Lazarus’s and public administration scholars’ work, Tummers et al. provide an operational and broader definition of coping as “behavioural efforts frontline workers employ when interacting with clients, in order to master, tolerate, or reduce external and internal demands and conflicts they face on an everyday basis” (2015: 1100).

Thus, coping mechanisms include all behaviours and actions developed by SLB to cope with inappropriate institutional context, resource scarcity, but also SLBs personal preferences and values. For instance, Baviskar & Winter (2017) explored the relation between SLB’s attitude towards the target group using data from a national survey of municipal child welfare caseworkers in Denmark. Their study shows a low level of coping mechanisms among caseworkers, but also strong personal variations. Specifically, resource shortage seems to have little impact over coping attitudes, but the data highlight the existence of a “strong relationship between SLBs’ individual attitudes—towards target populations, their work, and their institutional environment—and their use of coping” (Baviskar & Winter, 2016:341). Eriksson & Johansson (2022) explored the Swedish employment officers’ professional practices. Results show that SLBs, moved by compassion, developed coping mechanisms in favour of their clients. Moreover, Nielsen (2006) pointed out that SLBs are not only compelled but also enticed to cope.

Building on Folkman and Lazarus (1980), Tummers et al (2015) developed a matrix in order to classify and study coping mechanisms. They distinguish between: (a) behavioural mechanisms during worker-client interaction, such as rule bending and breaking; (b) behavioural mechanisms not during client-worker interaction, i.e., turnover or complaining; (c) cognitive mechanisms during client-worker interaction, for instance, client-oriented cynicism or compassion; and (d) cognitive mechanisms not during client-worker interactions, such as work alienation and cynicism toward work.

**Figure 1 Tummers et al's coping mechanism categorization**

<u>Examples of Various Ways of Coping of Frontline Workers (We Focus on Type 1)</u>		
	<u>Behavioral Coping</u>	<u>Cognitive Coping</u>
During client–worker interactions	1. Rule bending, rule breaking, aggression to clients, routinizing, rationing, using personal resources to help clients	2. Client-oriented cynicism, compassion towards clients, emotional detachment from clients
Not during client–worker interactions	3. Social support from colleagues, complaining towards managers, turnover, substance abuse	4. Cognitive restructuring, cynicism towards work, work alienation

Source: Tummers et al, 2015:1102

For this thesis, the attention will be focused only on behavioural coping mechanisms which intervene during the client-worker interaction.



Analogously to Bekkers and colleagues (2011), Tummer et al (2015) identifies three main behavioural coping mechanism families: (a) moving towards clients; (b) moving away from the clients; and (c) moving against the clients. Concretely, moving towards clients can be seen as a form of coping in clients' favour (such as rule-bending or helping clients with own resources), while moving against and away from clients are forms of coping mechanisms in favour of SLBs.

### **2.2.1. Moving toward clients**

This first family of coping mechanisms is consistent with the citizen-agent narrative (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000) or the "social work narrative, which could be described as 'people first'" (Dias & Maynard-Moody, 2007: 201). Rule-bending, that is, the adaptation of rules to clients' needs, is the most common coping mechanism (see Cohen, 2018; Deed, 2008; Evans, 2013, among others). Maynard-Moody & Musheno offer an example of this phenomenon "I'll kind of use the system and tweak the system to get more benefits - not so much for me, but for the kids on my casework. [...] I like to do the best that I can, and I'll bend the system, and occasionally I'll snap it in half" (2003: 113).

Erikson & Johansson (2022) found that some SLBs tend to implement coping mechanisms by bending the rules in favour of the clients. "Within this pattern, several interviewees refer to 'compassion' as a foundation for their actions, and the moral assumption is that if you as a professional meet a person in need, you are obliged to help them as best you can" (*Ibid*: 706). Such mechanisms include doing more than what the guidelines require and working (unregistered) overtime. In some cases, officers adapt the rules creatively (*Ibid*). Analogously to Erikson & Johanssons, Mescoli (2023) highlights that Public Social Action Centre workers use their discretionary power by providing migrants with extended social benefits.

Under certain circumstances, SLBs can cross the subtle line and break the rule instead of only bending it. For instance, Anagnostopoulos (2003) studied how Chicago secondary school teachers cope with the restrictive policy on student failure. Teachers' coping strategies varied from lowering the success requirement (bending the rule) to "altering results [which] refers to passing students who did not actually meet course requirements" (*Ibid*: 306).

Tummers et al identify a third way of coping by moving towards clients, which they define as "instrumental action" (2015: 1109) - the action of developing concrete and lasting solutions to cope with particularly persistent situations. Wagenaar (2004) describes the instrumental actions put in place by Dutch immigration officers to deal with the arrival of large groups of migrants. "According to the Schengen Agreement we don't have internal borders anymore within the EU. But Schiphol is an EU border. [...] People who arrive at an external EU border enter the quick asylum procedure. But when you enter the quick procedure from an external border you have no right to enter the country. So, we had to think of something so that we could keep those people at Schiphol Airport. So, we came up with the idea to create at terminal D at the airport a temporary facility with beds and everything. So, we could

keep those people outside our borders” (An extract of Judy’s story, part of Wagenaar field work. *Ibid*: 645). Similarly, Sebbe et al, 2021, focusing on the experience of probation officers, points out that front-line workers develop various instrumental actions to cope with resource scarcity and improve their relations with *offenders*. Strategies include “reading aloud or allowing their supervisees to read the reports intended for judicial authorities” (2021: 769) and/or adopting listening strategies.

In addition, SLBs can provide clients with personal resources, both material and immaterial. “I gave money to some young ones. [...] That girl didn’t have a thing, especially milk for the kid” (Dubois, 2010: 126). Lavee (2021) examined this phenomenon studying SLBs delivering informal personal resources (IPR). Through a large qualitative study (based on 214 in-depth interviews with education, health, and welfare practitioners), Lavee demonstrated that SLBs engage in providing IPR such as: (a) time investment; (b) emotional resources (such as emotional support); (c) instrumental resources (assisting with bureaucratic practices, translating documents, etc); (d) material resources (i.e., giving clients cash and/or buying them things).

The last coping method is “prioritizing among clients” or as Lipsky (1980) defined it, *creaming*. Tummers et al (2015) classified this mechanism as a “moving toward client” one. Nevertheless, in my view this classification is only partially correct. Indeed, prioritizing among clients allow SLBs to offer a quality service to certain clients. Hence, from this point of view, creaming can be considered as a coping mechanism toward the client. Notwithstanding, other clients may be “worse off” (Tummers et al, 2015:1109). That is, it may lead to the exclusion of some clients from accessing services (Brodkin, 2011), representing, thus, a moving against the client coping mechanism. Thereby, creaming is an in-between coping mechanism. When confronted with a greater number of clients than can be accommodated, SLBs “skim off the top” (Lipsky, 2010: 107) or select and help those who are more likely to succeed the bureaucratic procedures (Maynard-Moody & Musheno, 2000). “Employment counsellors, for example, may send to jobs people who have the greatest chance to gain employment anyway, to the neglect of people who are more difficult to place” (Lipsky, 2010:107). Consistent with this theory, Baviskar’s (2018) study on Danish and mathematics teachers in public and private schools highlight patterns of creaming among workers. In particular, the study pointed out that 30% of the entire sample creams. Creaming is directly related with shortage of resources (in the specific case time), parental engagement (in public schools) and parental satisfaction (in private schools).

Volckmar-Eeg & Vassenden studied SLBs’ emotional implication and its effect on creaming. They state that “caseworkers’ emotions constitute embodied expressions of rational logic in institutional demands. The clients whom the caseworkers hold positive emotions towards and become enthusiastic about, who ‘are motivated’ and ‘can make use of anything’, are the same clients whom they consider ‘likely to succeed’ (2021:172).

### **2.2.2. Moving away from clients**

“Moving away from clients” includes all those mechanisms developed by SLBs in order to deal with the constraints of their work environment, such as routinization and rationing.

“Routinization rations set procedures designed to ensure regularity, accountability, and fairness also [to] protect workers from client demands for responsiveness. They insulate workers from having to deal with the human dimensions of presenting situations. routines provide a legitimate excuse for not dealing flexibly, since fairness in a limited sense demands equal treatment” (Lipsky,1980: 100).

In addition, SLBs can first, increase clients’ cost to access the service: although SLBs do not have direct control over monetary cost, nevertheless they can increase (a) the time cost, mainly by establishing queuing patterns for clients; (b) managing information by giving or withholding shared information; (c) the psychological cost, such as imposing waiting time, childbearing. Second, SLBs develop conceptions of their jobs, and of clients, that reduce the strain between capabilities and goals, thereby making their jobs psychologically easier to manage. In other words, they narrow their job’s goals in order to reduce the gap between demand/reality/resources and the achievable results. Third, they can influence clients’ perception so as to render the gap between objectives and achievement more acceptable. “Moreover, thus as the work is experienced there is no dissonance between the job as it should be done and the job as it is done for a portion of the clientele. The worker knows in a private sense that he or she is capable of doing the job well and can better defend against the assaults to the ego which the structure of street-level work normally delivers. The teacher’s pet is not only an obedient child but also one who confirms to the teacher the teacher’s own capability” (Lipsky, 1980:151-2). Empirically, Trowler (1997) found that in order to deal with workload and stress, English teachers developed routinized behaviours including using teaching notes from previous years or signing any form students asked to “regardless of its purpose and whether they were the correct person to do so” (*Ibid*:308) Similar results have been found by Ding et al (2023), studying Chinese judges’ attitude towards current trial practices and commutation petitions. The findings show that judges develop routinized paperwork patterns “granting approvals to nearly all petitions and focusing on the legality of a small portion of cases required for court hearings and trials” (*Ibid*: 289). During their studies on Belgian Probation Officers (POs), Sabbe et al (2021) found that POs develop classical coping methods (such as prioritization, rationing, routinization, but also rule breaking) to deal with resource shortage, mainly time. In particular, POs testify “rationing service delivery to keep up with essential tasks despite severe time shortages and growing demands” (*Ibid*: 771), mainly by shortening the time dedicated to interactions.

### **2.2.3. Moving against clients**

The most common coping mechanism in this family consists of the rigid application of the rules. “Mostly, frontline workers rigidly follow rules as a way to control clients, especially those who are particularly demanding or manipulative” (Tummers et al, 2015:1110). Eriksson & Johnsson offer an empirical example of this phenomenon, by showing that some SLBs employ an “authority-centred pattern of practice” (2022:708) which includes rigid interpretations of rules and denying discretion.

In extreme cases, SLBs' behaviours may include aggression. Front-line workers may be subject to aggression (both physical and verbal). Nevertheless, aggression can occur the other way around, when SLBs behave aggressively towards clients as a way to cope with their frustration (Tummers et al, 2015). Moreover, Davidovitz & Cohen (2021) studied the correlation between violence against SLBs and coping mechanisms. Focusing on teachers and social workers, they found that SLBs may use their discretionary power (as a coping mechanism) to deal with violent clients.

Summarising, research in the field shows that SLBs develop different coping mechanisms in order to cope with their adverse professional contexts. Such mechanisms can be classified into three main categories: moving toward the clients, moving away from the clients and moving against the clients. Contrary to the state-agent narrative, empirical studies stress that SLBs tend to behave in ways that are beneficial for the clients (43% of the article reviewed by Tummers et al 2015. fall under this category). In other words, despite resource scarcity, front-line workers tend to cope by moving toward the clients rather than away or against. Indeed, in line with Maynard-Moody & Musheno (2000, 2003), studies show that SLBs adhere to the citizen-agent narrative, utilizing their discretionary power to help clients, even when they face limited resources and time.

“In sum, frontline workers seem to want to perform meaningful public service keying on their own clients, even in stressful situations” (Tummers et al, 2015:1112-1113).

### **2.3. Meso-level: network effect and relational agency**

Although Lipsky's conception highlights multiple aspects of street-level bureaucracy, it ignores some important elements, such as the network effect. Indeed, SLB studies have often employed an individual perspective focusing on the individual street-level bureaucrats who use their discretion to make decisions while interacting with the clients (Lovens, 2019). However, as highlighted by: “The pyramid-shaped organization chart depicting at the bottom the front-line worker as passively receiving and carrying out policies and procedures dispensed from above is a gross oversimplification. A more realistic model would place the front-line worker in the centre of an irregularly shaped sphere with vectors of differing size directed inward” (Weatherly, 1979: 9). In other words, SLBs should not be perceived as independent actors, but rather as actors embedded in a social and professional network (Hupe & Hill, 2007; Keiser, 2010) - “street-level bureaucrats work in a more or less dense sets of inter-organizational ‘exchanges’ of various forms” (Hupe & Hill,2007:284). Simplifying Weatherly's vision, Hupe & Hill (2007) affirm that SLBs work in a net of social relationships which can be divided into vertical and horizontal. The former refers to the functional and more or less structural relationships which SLBs entertain with clients and managers. On the other hand, the horizontal dimension refers to the relationships that a front-line worker entertains with peers (colleagues and/or workers of neighbour organisations). For this study, I am particularly interested in the latter dimension, which I further explain below.

Two research streams have studied this horizontal dimension: on the one hand, the collaborative networks (for an extensive literature review, see Isett et al, 2011; Kapucu et al, 2017) and, on the other hand, relational agency. Collaborative networks can be defined as “collections of government agencies, non-profits, and for-profits that work together to provide a public good, service, or “value” when a single public agency is unable to create the good or service on its own and/or the private sector is unable or unwilling to provide the goods or services in the desired quantities” (Isett et al, 2011: 158). The starting point of the collaborative networks’ literature is the network itself, defined as “a group of goal-oriented interdependent but autonomous actors that come together to produce a collective output (tangible or intangible) that no one actor could produce on its own” (Isett et al, 2011: 1161). Building on this definition, it seems inappropriate to talk about network when analysing how social workers, teachers and guardians influence unaccompanied minors’ educational careers. Indeed, although those actors may “come together”, they do not do so to produce an output that otherwise could not be provided. For this reason, it seems more appropriate to analyse such relations through the lens of the relational agency. The latter can be defined as “working with others to expand the ‘object of activity’ or task being working on by recognising the motives and the resources that others bring to bear as they too interpret it; aligning one’s own responses to the newly enhanced interpretations, with the responses being made by the other professionals as they act on the expanded object” (Edwards, 2010:64). Thereby, while the collaborative networks stream focuses on the network and on organizations working together, the “relational agency shifts the focus from the system to joint action and the impact on those who engage in it between and across systems. In doing so it regains a focus on individual learning theory points out the existing relationship among workers” (Edwards, 2005:174). If the former focuses on the existing relations among organizations (both formal or informal), the second highlights the importance of workers and their agency.

Relational agency hence refers to professionals working purposely together in order to solve a problem (Pantić & Florian, 2015; Pantić et al, 2024). It highlights a form of coping toward clients, by stressing professionals’ agency collaborating with each other to overcome obstacles (resource scarcity, strict rules, etc) preventing clients from accessing a service. Thus, analysing SLBs’ horizontal relationships means analysing whether and under which conditions SLBs interact purposely with their colleagues and peers in order to extent clients’ access to benefits and services. In the framework of this study, it is a matter of analysing whether and under which conditions social workers, teachers and guardians purposely develop relations to favour unaccompanied minors’ educational achievement.

The existing literature largely focuses on how teachers, by applying a relational agency, develop inclusive patterns for migrant students. Although teachers represent only one of the social worker groups which will be analysed in this work, it is possible to argue that empirical evidence and experiences can be extended to the other groups (social workers and guardians). Pantić et al (2024) studied how teachers exercise relational agency to support migrant students in Scotland, Finland and Sweden. Results show that, regardless of the country, teachers engage in relational agency with colleagues and social workers

outside the school to enable students' access to services and to overcome language barriers. Moreover, teachers seek to understand the cultural background and home situations of their students, helping them with issues around different expectations and norms, and sometimes attendance or behaviour problems. Therefore, this study shows that teachers engage in relational agency establishing coping mechanisms which can be qualified as "moving towards the clients". Indeed, through purposeful relations, SLBs aim to overcome barriers impeding students' access to the educational system and their subsequent achievement. Similarly, Buchanan's (2015) research on the experience of nine Californian teachers sheds light on the interplay between how teachers make sense of their professional role in a context of institutional reforms. She pointed out that teachers' agency was motivated by a mismatch between their professional identities, their commitment and institutional barriers. In particular, teachers engaged in relational agency in two different ways. First, by stepping up, that is, going above the expectation on their role and implementing alternative teaching methods, coaching peers, etc. Second, teachers also engaged in relational agency by pushing back to negotiate and/or reconfigure specific policies with which they disagreed. Making a parallel with the SLBs literature, it is possible to say that teachers engage in agency in order to cope with a restrictive work context and deal with institutional limitations. Furthermore, relations with peers provide SLBs with not only emotional support (Kapucu et al, 2017), and innovation (Maroulis 2015), but also information (Siciliano, 2015).

#### **2.4. Individual level and exo-system**

Individual-level factors influencing pupils' educational trajectories include their own characteristics, such as language proficiency and socio-economic characteristics. Socio-economic factors have a major impact on educational achievement, with a lower socio-economic condition being positively related with lower educational achievement (Jacobs et al, 2007, 2009; Jacobs & Rea, 2011; Marks, 2005; Rosenthal & Jacobs, 1968; Vassart, 2007).

Focusing on Belgium, Jacobs and Rea found similar patterns and results: "Inequalities in performance between natives and second-generation students can be almost entirely explained by variables such as the language spoken at home and the family's socio-economic situation." (2011:66).

Drawing from the PISA 2000 Assessment of Reading, mathematical and Scientific Literacy, Marks (2005) compared immigrants and non-immigrants educational achievement in Belgium. He analysed to what extent socio-economic, socio-cultural and school factors influence migrants' educational outcomes. He pointed out that socio-economic factors play a major role in shaping immigrant students' achievement. Those factors "could account for about quarter of the difference" between native and migrant students (*Ibid*: 940). Socio-cultural factors (number of books at home, cultural possession) seem to have a slight but rather relevant influence on the native-immigrant student achievement gap.

Moving to language proficiency, studies on the topic show that students with immigrant backgrounds tend to be less proficient in the language of schooling. Insufficient language proficiency is positively

related with poorer educational achievement (Stanat & Edele, 2016). Focusing the attention on Belgium, as demonstrated by Jacobs, Rea & Hanquinet (2007), Jacobs et al (2009) and Jacobs & Rea (2011), language proficiency and language spoken at home have a (major) impact on educational outcomes. Language skills are often related to previous educational experiences. In particular, Jacobs, Rea & Hanniquet (2007) found that migrant students who speak a language other than that of the test, scored, on average, 117 points less in mathematics and 118 less in reading than native students. This gap is partially reduced for students who speak the language of the test (the gap then is respectively 85 and 91 points in mathematics and reading).

Based on the FWB dataset, Delvaux (2011) provides a multifactorial analysis, taking into account (a) previous educational career; (b) nationality; (c) position in the naturalisation process and (d) neighbourhood socio-economic index on migration educational trajectory. Data show a relevant correlation between previous studies and educational success. Specifically, previous school failure remains a powerful predictive variable of future educational failure or a move to lower tracks.

Migration processes directly influence educational outcomes. There is a hierarchy amongst migrants according to their nationality: *primo-arrivants* < foreigners < naturalised < Belgian. The gap among those categories is not stable, it varies according to nationality. Other factors such as previous educational career and family shape the educational path.

Lastly, neighbourhood socio-economic level seems to partially influence migrant educational careers: lower neighbourhood socio-economic level is positively correlated with poorer educational achievement. However, this is not a perfect causal correlation. Indeed, if moving from a higher socio-economic level neighbourhood to a lower one is positively correlated with poorer educational outcome, moving from a lower socio-economic level neighbourhood to a higher one is also correlated with poorer success rate.

Lastly, Danhier & Martin (2014) evaluated the impact of compositional effect. Compositional effect is considered “As the impact of pupils’ aggregated characteristics (socio-economic status (SES), sociocultural capital, prior achievements, etc.) when these variables have been taken into account at the individual level” (Dumay & Dupriez, 2008: 440). Through a comparative analysis on Flemish and Walloon data, their results show that pupils’ position in the educational system and tracks mediate pupils’ background characteristics and educational achievement. Individual characteristics such as socio-demographic conditions, ethnic origins and language spoken at home still play an influential role. Peers’ effects and school composition have an additional impact on pupils’ achievement. Segregation affects school outcomes; it hampers the situation of disfavoured pupils by adding a negative compositional effect. Furthermore, it strengthens lower-achievers stigmatization. On the other hand, socio-economic mixing seems to have a positive impact on pupils with lower socio-economic conditions (*Ibid*).

Prior educational career influences not only educational achievements, but also pupils' motivation. Through ethnographic research, Aguer-Voyer et al (2014) showed that UFM's who had attended school in their country of origin were more motivated to participate in educational training in Belgium. At the opposite pole, pupils with a poor educational career in their origin country and who, in many cases, had already joined the labour market, perceived school as something they were compelled to attend against their will.

As for the exo-system, this refers, as explained above, to the social structure embedding pupils' educational development, i.e. educational system characteristics. The literature shows that two aspects are particularly relevant in shaping UFM and migrant students' educational careers: tracking and reception classes.

Most primary and secondary schooling is composed of a common curriculum followed by specific programs, the so-called educational tracking<sup>2</sup>. Educational systems based on tracking tend to allocate pupils at some stage of their educational career to different tracks, usually offering different curricula. (Brunello & Checchini, 2007; Van Houtte, 2004). School tracking and its effects are a controversial topic. Some countries, such as Belgium, Austria, Germany, Hungary and Slovakia employ an early tracking system, where pupils are streamed at an early age, while others (Canada, the US, the UK or Japan) have a comprehensive lower secondary school system (Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006) which involves tracking only at a later stage. The main argument in favour of the tracking system is based on the assumption that homogeneous classes permit specific curricula and appropriate teaching (Van Houtte, 2004, 2006), an assumption which is widespread in racialised and socio-economically mixed schools (Oakes et al, 1997). At the opposite pole, supporters of the late-track system argue that early-tracking largely disadvantages the lower group (Schofield, 2006; Van Houtte, 2004). Most studies agree that the early tracking system leads to greater gaps in pupils' achievement levels and the underachievement of the lower student group (see, for instance, Borghans et al, 2020; Hanushek & Wößmann, 2006; Heckmann, 2008; Jacob et al, 2007; Jacob 2012), although other scholars (e.g., Duflo et al, 2011; Dronkers & Korthals, 2015; Hidalgo-Hidalgo, 2014) defend early tracking arguing that such systems provide equalized opportunities. Apart from this controversy, studies have demonstrated that pupils in the lower tracks have lower educational outcomes compared to pupils in higher tracks, leading to educational ethno-stratification (Van Houtte, 2004), with migrant students tending to be overrepresented in the lower class (Schofield, 2006).

Moreover, tracking influences not only students' educational outcomes, but also the school staff culture and the school personnel's perception of pupils (Van Houtte, 2004). Indeed, teachers of different tracks teach different subjects, but the manner in which those subjects are taught is also track-dependent. In higher tracks, subjects are approached more academically, emphasizing process and more complex skills, whereas lower track teaching is more focused on basic skills and facts (*Ibid*, Van Houtte, 2006;

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<sup>2</sup> other appellations are stratification, streaming or ability grouping



Murphy & Hallinger, 1989; Stevens & Vermeersch, 2010). Duflo et al (2011) further found that teachers' efforts are higher in the upper track than in the lower one. The discussion on tracking is made even more complex when peer effect is taken into account (see below).

Lastly, reception classes and specific measures put in place to ensure the integration in schools of newly arrived migrants (including UFM). In Belgium, the educational reception system can be classified as a “compensatory support model” (European Commission, 2012), characterised by medium levels of linguistic support, outreach and intercultural education<sup>3</sup>. The countries employing this model seek to incorporate migrant pupils into the system without making substantial changes to the system itself. In other words, this system targets the gap rather than the reason and its origin (*Ibid*). As a result, the gap between *primo-arrivant* students and their native peers persists.

Focusing on the Belgian French-speaking system, Lucchini (2011) pointed out that MENAs and *primo-arrivant* students are systematically reoriented toward differential education (for those students who do not have the Basic Studies Certificate<sup>4</sup>) or towards vocational training. Very few students join an ordinary class corresponding to their level and the main reason seems to be poor language proficiency. Indeed, after a period in reception classes, pupils show some progress in language mastering, although their level is not sufficient to allow them to join an ordinary class (Lucchini et al, 2008; Maravelaky & Collès, 2004). Notwithstanding, poor language mastery is not the only reason. Looking at the Flemish system, Emery et al (2023) highlight that reception classes are isolated from the ordinary educational system. They constitute a kind of “island” (*Ibid*: 318) with specific subjects, goals and perspectives. Similar results were found by Petit & Manço (2005). Moreover, focusing on the transition from reception to ordinary classes, there are no policies which stipulate how ordinary education should facilitate the integration of pupils from reception classes into ordinary education. All is based on language mastering, perceived to be linked with academic knowledge. Thus, due (often) to the lack of language proficiency, students are perceived to have lower chances to succeed (explaining perhaps the high presence of migrant students in vocational training).

### **3. Contextualisation & legislative framework**

Before presenting the results, the following section outlines the Belgian legislative framework concerning UFM, before presenting briefly the main features of the Belgian educational system and reception classes.

Article 5 of the 24 December 2002 Guardianship Act<sup>5</sup> defines unaccompanied minors as non-EEA minors under 18 who are unaccompanied by a person exercising parental authority or guardianship and

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<sup>3</sup> Compared to the comprehensive model display by Denmark and Sweden

<sup>4</sup> Grade level certification obtained upon completion of sixth grade in elementary school

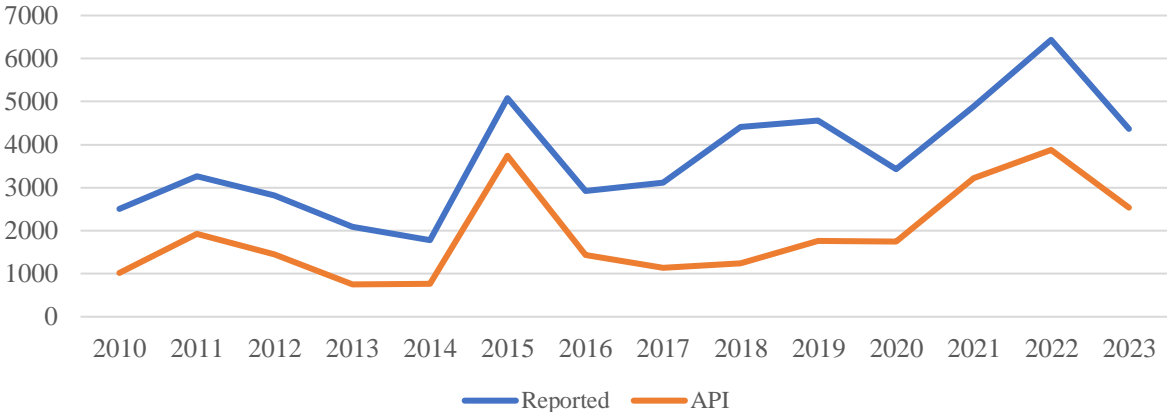
<sup>5</sup> 24 December 2002 - Title XIII, chapter 6 of the Programme Act on the guardianship of unaccompanied foreign minors. <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/2002/12/24/2002021488/justel>. Consulted on June 19, 2024.

have either applied for refugee status or do not satisfy conditions for entry and residence laid down by the laws on entry, residence, establishment and expulsion of foreign nationals.

Article 3 of the 12 May 2014 law amending Title XIII, Chapter VI, of the Programme Act (I) of 24 December 2002<sup>6</sup> extended the definition of unaccompanied minors to EU citizens who (a) are not in possession of a legalized document certifying that the person exercising parental authority or guardianship has given permission to travel and reside in Belgium; (b) are not enrolled in the population register; and (c) who have either applied for a temporary residence permit on the basis of article 61/2, § 2, paragraph 2, of the law of 15 December 1980 on access to the territory, residence, settlement and removal of foreign nationals, or are in a vulnerable situation.

As shown in Figure 1, the inflow of unaccompanied minors reported in Belgium increased since 2010. It reached its peaks in 2015 and 2022. In 2024, 1521 new unaccompanied minors have been reported to the Guardianship (data updated May 2024).

**Figure 2 reported unaccompanied minors and applicants for international protection**



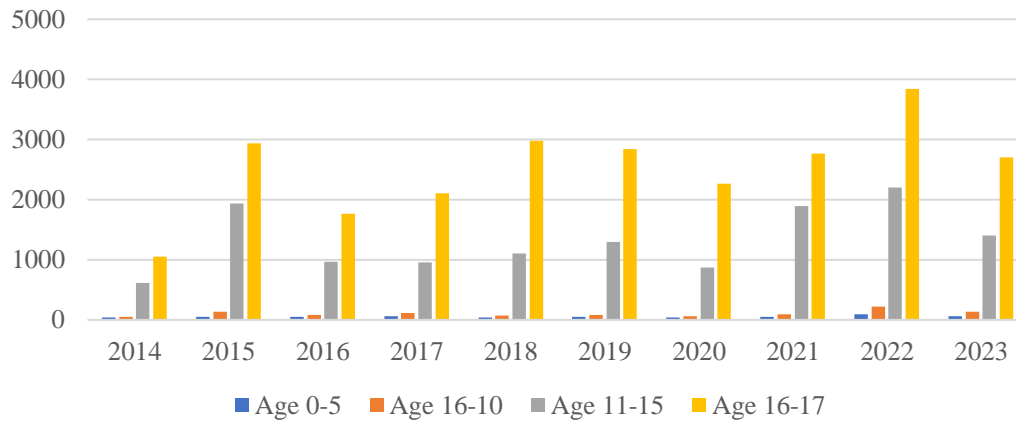
Source: own elaboration on guardianship department data, 2023. API: Applications for International Protection

According to the Guardianship department’s data from 2023 (presented in Figure 3), in average, almost two thirds are within the group age 16-17 (the percentage varies between 58% in 2015 and 71% in 2018). Moreover, the vast majority are male (76% in 2014 and 92% in 2021).

**Figure 3 unaccompanied minors by age group**

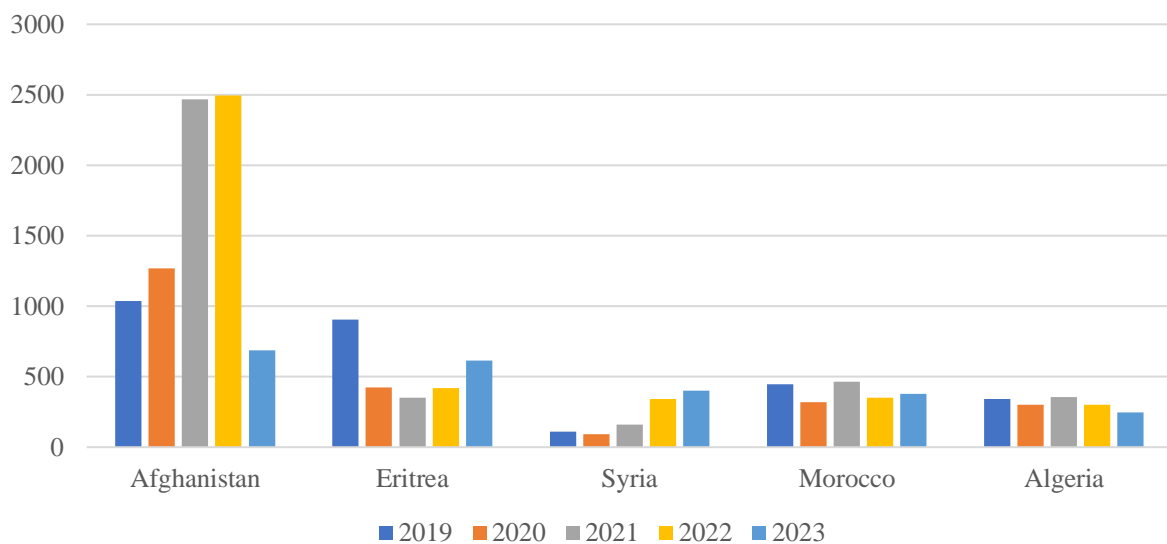
Source: own elaboration on Guardianship Department (2023)

<sup>6</sup> 12 May 2014 - Act amending Title XIII, Chapter VI, of the Programme Act (I) of 24 December 2002 as regards the guardianship of unaccompanied foreign minors. <http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/2014/05/12/2014009398/moniteur>. Consulted on June 19, 2024. <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/2014/05/12/2014009398/justel>. Consulted on June 19, 2024.



Afghanis are, by far, the most represented nationality, followed by Eritreans, Syrians, Moroccans and Algerians.

**Figure 4: main nationalities of origin, 2019-2023**



Source: own elaboration on Guardianship Department data (2023)

### 3.1. Reception and integration path

Briefly, reception and integration of unaccompanied minors is divided into three main phases. Upon arrival on Belgian territory, all persons declaring themselves as minors and about whom there is no doubt as to their minority are transferred to an observation and orientation centre (hereinafter OOC). In case of doubt about the age of the person, an age test<sup>7</sup> must be performed within three days (this delay can be exceptionally extended by three further days). Minors are then transferred to an OOC within 24

<sup>7</sup>For further information, see Fournier, K. & Plate-forme Mineurs en Exil. (2017). *L'estimation de l'âge des MENA en question : problématique, analyse et recommandations*. <https://www.mineursenexil.be/files/Image/mena-Cadre-juridique/Estimation-de-l-age-as-printed.pdf>

hours from their arrival in the territory or, alternatively, from when the notification is sent to the person concerned regarding the decision on determination of age. Minors stay in the OOC for a period of 15 days, extendable by a maximum of 5 days (art. 40 & 41 Law 2007-01-12/52<sup>8</sup>). OCCs provide minors with material needs and perform an initial medical, psychological and social assessment. If the minor initiates an asylum procedure, they will be transferred to a second-phase reception centre or host family. Otherwise, if another procedure is initiated, the minors are put under the protection of the youth service.

Brussels has four second-phase shelters for unaccompanied minors: Jette, Uccle, Schaerbeek and Evere. The second phase is usually the longest one. During this phase minors are accompanied by their guardian and shelter personnel in all the legal procedures (such as the asylum application), on a path towards an autonomous life. This phase is devoted to the establishment of the minor's trajectory in Belgium, which includes, among other things, their educational career. The third phase corresponds to the accompaniment to independent living. During this phase, minors who are at least 15 years old and whose asylum application has been accepted, can be transferred to an ILA (*initiative locale d'accueil*, local reception initiative). ILAs are a semi-autonomous reception system developed in partnership between the Federal Agency for the Reception of Asylum Seekers (FEDASIL) and Public Social Action Centre (CPAS). During this phase, UFM's are housed in small collective housing units. An ILA seeks to prepare UFM's to leave the reception network and start an independent life.

### 3.2. Guardianship

In Belgium, the status of guardianship of unaccompanied minors has been established by the 2002-12-22/45 Program Act and further amended by Article 385 of the 2003-12-23/42 Program Act<sup>9</sup>, and its implementing 2003-12-23/61 Royal Decree<sup>10</sup>.

Anyone who wishes to do so and demonstrates that they have the necessary knowledge and motivation may be enrolled in the guardianship service list (Art 13 §1, 2003-12-23/61 Royal Decree). There are, however, some exceptions to who can formally take the role of a guardian. These exceptions include: (a) the persons referred to in articles 397 and 398, 1° and 2°, of the Civil Code<sup>11</sup>; (b) persons who, by virtue of their position, present a conflict of interest with the minor (e.g. personnel of the Foreigners

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<sup>8</sup> 12 January 2007 - Law on the reception of asylum seekers and certain other categories of foreigners. <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/2007/01/12/2007002066/justel>. Consulted on June 19, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> 22 December 2003 - Program Act. <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/2003/12/22/2003021248/justel>. Consulted on June 19, 2024.

<sup>10</sup> 22 December 2003 - Royal Decree implementing Title XIII, Chapter 6 "Guardianship of unaccompanied foreign minors" of the Program Law of December 24, 2002.

<https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/arrete/2003/12/22/2004009010/justel>. Consulted on June 19, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> The following cannot be appointed as guardians: (a) "those who do not have free disposal of their property"; (b) "those in respect of whom the Youth Court has ordered one of the measures provided for in articles 29 to 32 of the Youth Protection Act of April 8, 1965"; (c) "persons of notorious misconduct"; (d) "those whose management would attest to incapacity or infidelity"; (e) "those who have, or whose spouse, legal cohabitant, de facto cohabitant, descendant or ascendant has a lawsuit with the minor in which the latter's status, fortune or a significant part of his or her property is compromised" (Art 397 & 398 Civil Code). Consulted on June 19, 2024.

Office, the General Commissioner for Refugees and Stateless Persons and the Permanent Refugee Appeals Commission).

Guardians are appointed by the guardianship department (art 8 §1) and are responsible for representing the unaccompanied minor in all legal acts, as well as in any other administrative or judicial procedure. Specifically, they are responsible for accompanying the minor in the legal procedures to (a) apply for asylum or a residence permit (art 9 §1); (b) ensuring that the minor is enrolled in school and that they receive appropriate psychological and medical care as well as a suitable accommodation (art 10 §1).

The guardianship comes to an end when: (a) the minor is entrusted to the person exercising parental authority; (b) the minor turns 18; (c) in the event of death, emancipation, adoption, marriage or acquisition of the Belgian nationality; (d) when the minor is removed from the country; when the minor has disappeared from his/her place of residence and the guardian has had no news of him/her for 4 months; (e) when the minor, a national of an EU/EEA country is no longer in a vulnerable situation (Art 24, Program Act 2002, amended by Art 6 Law 2014-05-12/31<sup>12</sup>).

As stipulated in the Art 6 of the Royal Decree 2003/61, guardians are remunerated<sup>13</sup>. Based on the number of pupils each guardian has in charge (and, consequently, the remuneration that each guardian receive), it is possible to distinguish three different types of guardians: (a) the volunteers, who are in charge of at most five pupils; (b) the self-employed on a principal or secondary basis, as of the sixth guardianship; (c) the employee of an association offering a guardianship service. In the latter case, each tutor is in charge of least 25 pupils (Art 1 §2 Royal Decree 2018-12-06 amending Art 7bis Royal Decree 2003-12-22/61<sup>14</sup>). There are two associations in Brussels that provide a guardianship service: *Service Social de Solidarité* (hereinafter SESO) and Caritas International.

### **3.3. Policies on unaccompanied minors' educational career**

Once the minors are placed in a second-phase centre, they should be immediately enrolled in school. As previously explained, guardians are legally responsible for school enrolment, although reception centres can also fulfil this task.

Unaccompanied minors are firstly registered in a DASPA or an OKAN class. These classes represent specific devices for *primo-arrivants*, an intermediary step towards schooling that provides pupils with specific training (mainly language courses). The two systems differ in terms of educational pathway, resources and organisation.

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<sup>12</sup> 12 May 2014 - Act amending Title XIII, Chapter VI, of the Program Act (I) of December 24, 2002, with respect to the guardianship of unaccompanied foreign minors.

<http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/2014/05/12/2014009398/moniteur>. Consulted on June 19, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Guardians receive a fixed allowance of € 795.03 per guardianship per year, in addition to other expenses (the total is approximately €1100).

<sup>14</sup> 6 December 2018 - Royal Decree amending the Royal Decree of December 22, 2003 implementing Title XIII, Chapter 6 "Guardianship of unaccompanied foreign minors" of the Program Law of December 24, 2002. <http://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/arrete/2018/12/06/2018032475/moniteur> Consulted on June 19, 2024.

The DASPA classes (*Dispositif d'Accueil et de Scolarisation des élèves Primo-Arrivants et Assimilés*, Reception and schooling system for new arrivals and assimilated pupils) have been established by the *Communauté Française Wallonie-Bruxelles* (French Community Wallonia-Brussels, CFWB) decree 2019-02-07<sup>15</sup> and have replaced the so-called *classes passerelles*<sup>16</sup>. The objective of the DASPA classes is to facilitate the integration of *primo-arrivant* pupils and their assimilation into the Belgian educational system.

Are considered as *primo-arrivants* those pupils who, as per Art 2 of the CFWB Decree 2019-02-07, are: (a) aged at least 2.5 years old at 30 September of the enrolment year and not older than 18; (b) have applied for asylum or have been recognised as refugees; (c) have been in Belgium for less than one year.

DASPA includes a minimum of 28 course hours, of which a minimum of 16 are devoted to French, Human Sciences and Civic Education, while a minimum of 8 are devoted to Math and Sciences. Pupils can take DASPA classes from a minimum of one week and up to a maximum of one year, renewable for six additional months. Pupils who are declared illiterate at the time of enrolment are entitled to a further extension of six months. The decision on the extension lies with the Integration Council<sup>17</sup> (Art 13 §1,2 CFWB Decree 2019-02-07). Pupils can follow part of their lessons in ordinary classes: before the tenth month of the reception class, the decision shall be taken by the integration council, while after the tenth month, the pupil must join for at least 6 periods<sup>18</sup> per week an ordinary class of equivalent level to the one he or she will be joining following the period in the DASPA class. These integration periods are raised to 12 per week from the 12th month and 18 from the 18th month (Art 15 CFWB Decree 2019-02-07).

Once the time in a DASPA class is completed, the student is enrolled an ordinary class or a dual training school (such a CEFA, *Centre d'Education et de formation en Alternance*, Work-linked Education and Training Centre). In order to determine which class the pupil should/can join, the school must request the official equivalence of the pupil's level of study issued by the CFWB. If the pupil cannot provide any document proving their level of education, the Integration Council can issue a certificate of eligibility for any year of secondary education, with the exception of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grades, on condition that the pupil has been enrolled in DASPA class for a period of at least 6 months (Art 18 §1 CFWB Decree 2019-02-07).

The OKAN classes (*Onthaalklas voor Anderstalige Nieuwkomers*, welcoming classes for non-native newcomers) have been established by the *Vlaams Regerings* (Flemish Government) decree

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<sup>15</sup> 07 February 2019 - Décret visant à l'accueil, la scolarisation et l'accompagnement des élèves qui ne maîtrisent pas la langue de l'enseignement dans l'enseignement organisé ou subventionné par la Communauté française. [https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/fr/leg\\_res\\_02.php?ncda=46275&referant=l01](https://www.gallilex.cfwb.be/fr/leg_res_02.php?ncda=46275&referant=l01). Consulted on June 19, 2024

<sup>16</sup> For further information, see 2001-06-14 CFWB Decree.

<sup>17</sup> The integration council is composed by the principal (or his-her representative) and all the teacher of the class.

<sup>18</sup> one period corresponds to 50 minutes of lesson time

BaO/2006/03<sup>19</sup>. Are considered as *anderstalige nieuwkomer* (non-native speaker newcomers) all students who: (a) do not possess the Belgian or Dutch nationality; (b) not have attended a Dutch-speaking educational establishment for a full school year; (c) are not sufficiently proficient in Dutch to follow the courses; (d) for secondary school: are at least 12 years of age by December 31 following the start of the school year, and no older than 18 years of age (Art 2 §1. Besluit van de Vlaamse regering 24/05/2002<sup>20</sup>).

Schooling in the OKAN class lasts for one year and may be repeated. The curriculum includes between 28 and 32 hours of course work per week, of which a maximum of 4 hours are dedicated to courses other than Dutch. Once the period in an OKAN class is completed, the pupil can join an ordinary class or a dual training school (such as DBSO, *deeltijds beroepssecundaire onderwijs*, part-time vocational secondary education). The orientation post-OKAN is composed of three elements: (a) the evaluation of the student carried out by the integration council; (b) “introductory courses” (similarly to the French-speaking system, OKAN pupils may spend a short period of time of usually 1-2 weeks in an ordinary class of their choice); (c) continuous accompaniment by the pupil’s coach. Indeed, the Dutch-speaking system provides for the presence of a professional figure, a coach, who accompanies OKAN pupils throughout their integration journey. The coach is in charge of monitoring the students’ progress and helping them in their orientation choice.

### 3.4. Ordinary classes

Belgium is a federal system based on Regions (Wallonia, Flanders and Brussels-Region) and linguistic communities (French, Flemish and German). The country went through four constitutional reforms since the 1970s and the educational system followed a similar path (Bouttemont, 2004). Since 2005, French and Flemish Communities are fully in charge of their own educational systems, except for: (a) the start and end date of the school year; (b) the minimum conditions for the award of diplomas and (c) pension plan (s. 127 of the Constitution).

Moreover, as stated by Law 29-05-1959, the so-called *pacte scolaire* (School pact), the Belgian educational system is composed of two macro-networks: (a) official, non-denominational; and (b) free - schools belonging to this network can be either denominational or non-denominational. Official network is funded by FWB or VGC; schools belonging to the official network can be directly organised and managed by subsidiary authorities or by provinces and municipalities. Schools belonging to this network are non-denominational and regulated by the S 24 of the constitution and, for FWB, the Decree

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<sup>19</sup> 30 June 2006 - Onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige nieuwkomers. <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document/13800>. Consulted on June 19<sup>th</sup> 2024.

<sup>20</sup> 24 May 2002 - Besluit van de Vlaamse regering betreffende de onderbreking van de beroepsloopbaan van de personeelsleden van de hogescholen in de Vlaamse Gemeenschap en van de Hogere Zeevaartschool. <https://data-onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/edulex/document.aspx?docid=13290>. Consulted on June 19<sup>th</sup> 2024.

of 31 March 1994, 17 December 2003, the Order of the Government of the French Community of 16 June 2004 and the Circular 2198 of 18 February 2008.

For what concerns the free network, it consists of all schools managed by private actors (private asbl or brotherhoods among others).

**Table 1 Belgian educational system's organisation and networks.**

Official		Free	
Non-denominational		Denominational	Non-denominational
Organised by provinces, municipalities or Cocof/Gemeenschappelijke Gemeenschapscommissie and funded by FWB/VGC		Funded by FWB/VGC	Not-funded by FWB/VGC
Organised and funded by FWB/VGC		Funded by FWB/VGC	Not-funded by FWB/VGC

*Source: own elaboration on Ouderwijis Brusel & Education.be*

The main difference among those sub-networks, apart from the denominational character is related to the so-called organisational power (OP), which is the instance in charge of the network's organisation. Indeed, being part of one network rather than another one can influence the relationships amongst schools. In particular, schools tend to have relations only with other institutes belonging to the same network/having the same OP.

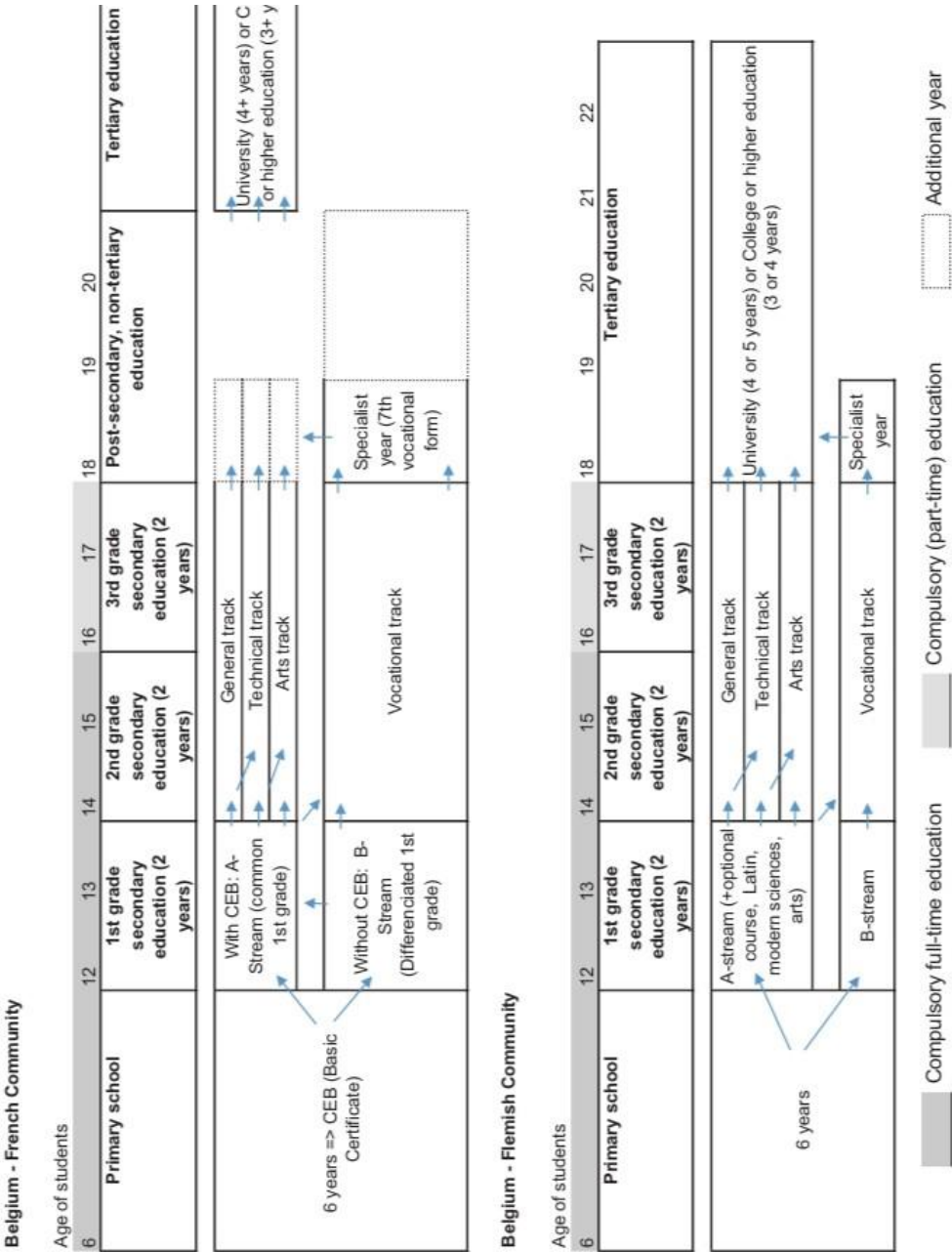
### 3.4.1. Tracks

The Law of 19 July 1971 on the general structure and organisation of secondary education and the Royal Decree of 29 June 1984 on the organisation of secondary education in the Belgian educational system is, by consequence, divided into three tracks (general, technical/artistic and professional) plus a fourth represented by the co-operative education.

Furthermore, tracks can be grouped into two different branches: transitional education (which give access to higher education) and qualificative education (oriented towards the labour market). Technical education of qualification represents an exception: students in this branch can enrol in the university upon passing a preparatory year (7<sup>th</sup> year).



**Figure 5: French and Dutch communities track system**



Source Van Praag et al, 2019: 161

As previously mentioned, there are differences between the tracks not only in the subjects taught, but also in teaching quality, teacher perception and, in general, student future perspectives. Summarizing, unaccompanied minors' educational careers appear to be pretty straightforward on paper. Indeed, according to the legislation, minors should follow a similar pattern: upon their arrival in Belgium, and when there is no doubt concerning their age, minors should be placed in an OCC within 24 hours.

Otherwise, an age test should be performed within three days, extendable to another three. In the event that the test shows that the person is underage, they will be placed in an OCC. The stay in the first-phase centre should last 15 days, during which the minors receive any medical care required and a guardian should be appointed. Once the fortnight has passed, the minor is transferred to a second-phase centre where their life plan will be defined. The tutor, in collaboration with the centre and according to the preferences of the minor, will enrol them in a suitable school. After a period in a DASPA/OKAN class, the pupil will be further reoriented toward an ordinary class or vocational training.

#### **4. Methodology**

This thesis seeks to evaluate how shelters, schools and guardians shape unaccompanied minors' educational careers. To do so, the analysis is based on a qualitative exploratory research based on semi-structured interviews conducted during the period 17 March-26 June 2024. This method has been preferred to quantitative analysis due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of my research. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to gather the necessary information without limiting the discussion, granting interviewees the opportunity to share anecdotes, personal experiences and, above all, aspects of which I was unaware (see also Oliveir De Sardan, 2008; Quivy & Van Campenhoudt, 2011 for an overview of the advantages of using semi-structured interviews for data collection).

Designing the research, after a first appraisal, I opted to limit the analysis to the first two transition phrases of unaccompanied minors' educational careers, namely enrolment in school (including school choice and enrolment processes) and their reorientation following the period in DASPA/OKAN classes. Moreover, there are several reasons for which I focused on evaluating the presence and influence of a network on unaccompanied minors' educational careers. First, if unaccompanied minors undertake a school career, they are registered initially in a DASPA/OKAN class, being *primo-arrivant* pupils. These classes represent a compulsory stage of their schooling and the probability of finding unaccompanied pupils is higher in these classes than in ordinary ones. It is also more likely that schools and their personnel have developed specific patterns and behaviours towards unaccompanied minors and that these schools entertain relationships with other actors in the domain. Second, it is reasonable to assume that DASPA/OKAN classes have a major impact on unaccompanied minors' educational paths, being a device developed *ad hoc* to facilitate their integration into the Belgian school system. In particular, DASPA/OKAN teachers can directly influence MENAs' schooling in case the latter don't have documents attesting their level of study. In such situations, the integration council (composed of teachers) is called to assess the pupil's level of study which then determines the continuation of studies. Indeed, this certification determines not only the year of study, but also the track that the pupil can/has to join.

Furthermore, the fieldwork has been geographically restricted to Brussels (with one exception, see below). The focus on Brussels was justified by its high concentration of schools and shelters. The city has: (a) four shelters for unaccompanied minors, two managed by Fedasil (Jette and Scharbeek) and

Red-Cross (Uccle and Evere); (b) 24 secondary schools organising a DASPA class and 4 schools that organized at least an OKAN class for the academic year 2023/2024 (even though not all of them accept unaccompanied minors). This geographical concentration allowed me to explore the presence of a “network effect” among actors. In other words, I could examine if there is any form of partnership and collaboration among the studied actors and if this influences unaccompanied minors’ educational careers.

In particular, I conducted (27) interviews - with shelter workers (5), school personnel (13), guardians (9) (for more detail see Annex 1). In terms of sampling, I proceeded in different manners according to the type of actors. With regard to schools, I contacted all schools in Brussels that organized at least a DASPA/OKAN class for this academic year. For this, I used the list containing all DASPA classes in Brussels, which is available on the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* website dedicated to education<sup>21</sup> (I used the last updated list from February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2024). For OKAN classes, I used the list available on the *Onderwijs in Brussel website*<sup>22</sup> (accessed on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, although no information is provided as to the date when this list was last updated).

When the DASPA/OKAN class organiser’s contact details were directly available on the school’s website, I contacted the person directly. Otherwise, I got in contact with the school reception which later transferred my request to the most appropriate person. For schools that did not have a DASPA/OKAN coordinator/organiser, I got in contact with the school principals. I then excluded from the list all schools that have not had unaccompanied minors as pupils. Unfortunately, some schools refused my request for an interview. Therefore, my final sample includes nine French-speaking and two Dutch-speaking schools. In five cases, I interviewed only one organiser, while in other cases I’ve interviewed at least two people. In one case (Ecole Ernest Richard) I could meet the whole DASPA team.

As far as shelters are concerned, I first contacted all four second-phase Brussels shelters for unaccompanied minors (Scharbeek, Evere, Jette and Uccle), with the aim of interviewing the relevant personnel (i.e. the persons in charge of shelter-school relationships, the enrolment and follow-up of minors’ schooling). I interviewed the coordinator of the Jette shelter but did not manage to obtain an interview with the Schaerbeek shelter<sup>23</sup>. I then decided to add the Dilbeek shelter to the study group. This is the only exception regarding the geographical restriction of my study. The exception is due to the fact that: (a) Dilbeek is on the border with Brussels; (c) due to its geographical position, some students are enrolled in Brussels schools, mainly in Anderlecht (a school that is part of my study).

Finding guardians to participate in this study followed a less structured strategy. As there is no open access database containing information about guardians in Belgium, I first asked schools and shelters if

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<sup>21</sup> For further information, please see: <http://enseignement.be/index.php?page=23677>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.onderwijsinbrussel.be/en/learning-and-studying/structure-education-and-training/reception-class-children-different-mother>

<sup>23</sup> the contact person was/is on maternity leave

they could facilitate contact with the guardians with whom they collaborate. However, this strategy was not successful given their reticence in sharing personal information for clear data protection (GDPR) reasons. Thus, I opted for three other strategies to recruit guardians. First, I reached out to two CSOs that provide guardianship services: Caritas International and SESO. This allowed me to interview four guardians, two from each CSO. I also contacted ATF (*Associations des Tuteurs Francophones*, a French-speaking guardian association) asking to share my request to get in touch with guardians. In parallel, I also contacted the Guardianship Department, which published an announcement about my research in its monthly newsletter. In this manner, I was able to get in contact with four more guardians. Lastly, during my fieldwork, I was in contact with N.M., a teacher who is also a guardian. It is interesting to underline that 6 out of 9 guardians composing the sample have dual roles: (a) four are both guardians and social workers; (a) one also acts as the co-director of a shelter in Wallonia; (c) one is a teacher and a guardian.

Before starting each interview, I asked the interviewee's consent to use and share the information collected during the interview. Each person has been informed about their rights and they were asked to fill and sign a consent form. Only two people asked to remain anonymous, the others have not expressed a preference and/or consented to the disclosure of their whole name. Nevertheless, I've decided to use only their initials due to the nature of the information shared.

I always started the interviews by explaining my research project and by asking the interviewees to present themselves (workers were also asked to present their function and responsibilities). I then continued with general questions regarding the educational pathways of unaccompanied minors by asking the interviewees to describe such pathways from their viewpoints and experiences. These first questions focused on: (a) the incongruencies between policies and practices; (b) specific patterns developed by the actors/institution; (c) potential constraints and critical points, which were further explored during the interviews. This approach has led me to slightly redefine my research. Indeed, at first, I had decided to focus my attention only on schools and shelters, thus excluding guardians. My initial research plan was to interview guardians only for the purpose of gathering information about the school experience of their pupils to avoid ethical difficulties related to interviewing unaccompanied minors. However, my first interviews with schools and shelters brought out details and critical aspects related to guardians' roles and attitudes. This justified adding guardians to the list of actors analysed in this research.

Interviews have been recorded and afterwards transcribed through the use of an artificial-intelligence transcriber (GoodTape). Raw data have also been analysed in order to highlight any relevant information.

During interview analysis, the attention has been brought on specific mechanisms and solutions put in place, but also language and word choice which could complement or contradict interviewees narrative, adding so relevant information to the analysis.

## 5. Results

The data collected during the fieldwork highlighted the existence of an important gap between policies related to unaccompanied minors' educational career and reality on the ground. UFM's do not follow the linear pathway described in the previous pages. According to the policy in place, only 20 days should elapse between a minors' arrival and the start of their integration process in a second-phase reception centre. During this time, a guardian should be appointed, so to ensure the start of the procedures. In reality, this is not often the case. As will be explained later, there is a delay of approximately 3 to 6 months between a minors' arrival in Belgium and the moment in which they are appointed a guardian. During this period, minors are often stuck in an administrative limbo, as no administrative procedure (including asylum) can be undertaken without a guardian. As for school enrolment, shelters may enrol pupils, but it depends on their will and workload.

As far as the educational system is concerned, it does not seem to fit unaccompanied minors' needs. Sensi claims that "as soon as they arrive in Belgium, MENAs are thrust into a world of compulsory schooling, of which they know nothing. [...] For them, school is all too often just another crossing on the road to exile rather than real integration." (2011:65). Indeed, for UFM's (just like any other minors), education is compulsory. Minors are enrolled in an educational career without necessarily taking into account their needs and their wishes. As the interviewed actors testified, minors are often willing to quickly find a job in order to provide for the needs of their families back home. Moreover, according to the interviewees, unaccompanied minors (especially Afghanis and Syrians) are often illiterate and lack sufficient cultural capital and knowledge about educational norms to join the educational system. Thus, for them, education may turn out to be just another crossing on the road to exile. Moreover, guardians lament the lack of alternative solutions such as Tchai<sup>24</sup> and la Petite École<sup>25</sup>.

I find that the Tchai institution makes a lot more sense than traditional schooling for some young people, especially when they reach the age of 16 or 17, when they're less integrated into a support system. On the other hand, I have my youngest child who's 9 years old, and for him, school is his whole life, so he's trying to follow the traditional route. But I think [age] is still a fairly decisive criterion.

(L.D. professional volunteer guardian, 28-05-2024)

In addition to the factors presented above, service providers, through their positionality and agency can shape unaccompanied minors' educational careers. As explained previously, the analysis is focused on

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<sup>24</sup> Tchāi is an educational and psycho-social structure for young exiles with little schooling. They offer group literacy workshops, multi-disciplinary activities, career discovery and individual follow-up. Through these different approaches, we encourage young people to settle down, rebuild their lives and gradually find a fulfilling and personal way of integrating into the host society.

For further information, see: <https://tchaibxl.be/>

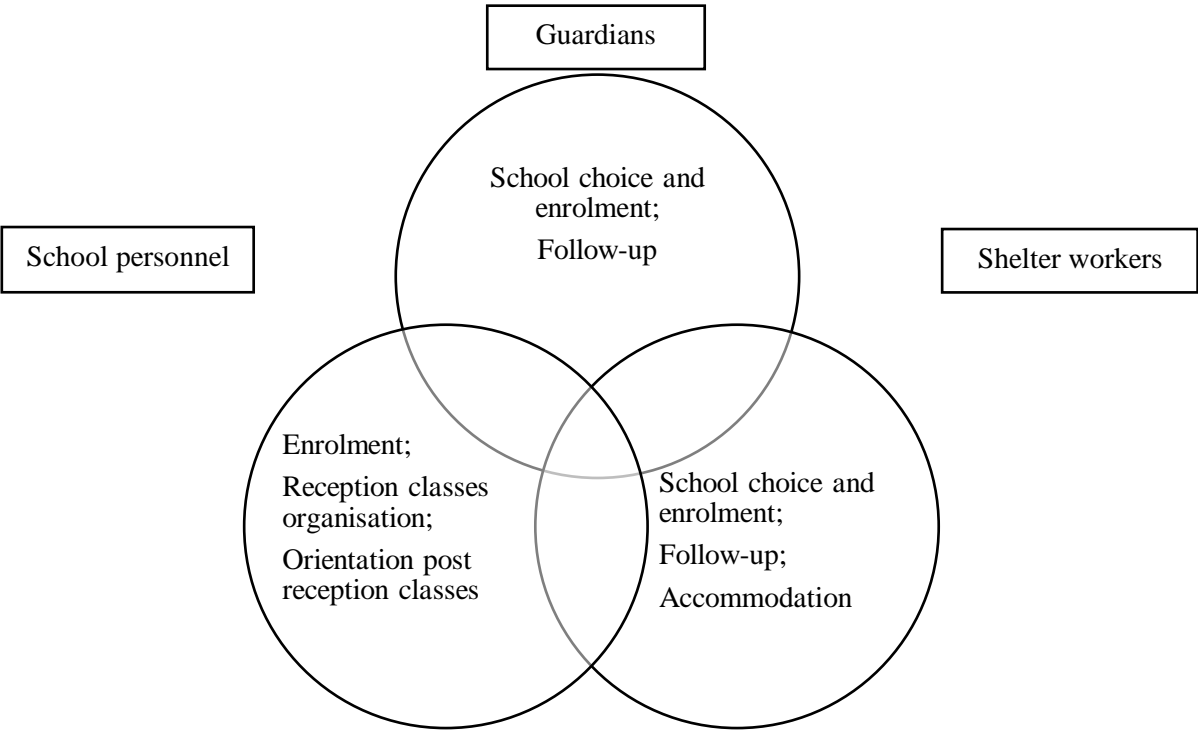
<sup>25</sup> La Petite École is a pedagogical and therapeutic pre-schooling program. It is a place of transition to school for children from exile, who have never attended school or who do not attend it often enough.

For further information, see: <https://www.lapetiteecolebxl.be/>

the first part of UFM’s educational career, from the enrolment in school until orientation after reception classes. Within this temporal frame, it is possible to identify three main areas where actors can impact directly the educational career of the pupil: school choice and enrolment; reception classes organisation and the orientation post-reception classes. Moreover, shelters may intervene alongside this temporal frame by putting in place accommodation solutions which may directly or indirectly influence pupils’ educational career.

Each actor can act within a specific sphere of influence, meaning that they intervene in one or more phases of unaccompanied minors’ educational careers. Some particular phases, such as the school selection and enrolment, may see the intervention of all three kinds of actors analysed. Others, such as the orientation post reception class, are usually influenced by the agency of only one actor. Figure 4 below summarizes the task that each actor is in charge of.

**Figure 6: guardians, school personnel and shelter workers’ spheres of influence**



The figure illustrates two important aspects. First of all, the school personnel, due to their positionality and attributed tasks, have a greater room for manoeuvre. Indeed, as is easily understandable, the school staff intervenes in all stages of minors’ educational careers, except for minors who are oriented toward adult vocational training (this point will be discussed later). In other words, the school personnel’s agency is expected to have a significant impact UFM’s educational careers.

Secondly, the figure also shows that, as far as minors’ education is concerned, shelters and guardians share partially overlapping roles concerning the responsibility for pupils’ school choices, enrolment and follow-up. Specifically, guardians are legally obliged to ensure minors’ enrolment in school, although the responsibility for UFM’s schooling and educational follow-up falls on shelters as well.

Focusing for a moment on narratives, it is interesting to highlight that each of the interviewed actors display a narrative which can be qualified as citizen-agent. During the interviews, each of the interviewees, regardless of their position, put forward their commitment to the cause and claimed to be acting in the best interests of UFM. This is reflected also in the agency and coping mechanisms that they developed. Notwithstanding, some actors, especially guardians, due to their role of holding parental authority over pupils, tend to develop attitudes and agency which are in contrast with pupils' wishes, an aspect which will be discussed in the following pages.

Apart from actors' agency, pupils' individual characteristics, mainly their age and language proficiency, also remain important predictors of their educational career. Specifically, according to interviewees, younger minors (who are of primary school age) often have a "smooth" educational career. Pupils at this age tend to easily integrate into the educational system, quickly acquiring sufficient language skills and educational capital and educational norms. As consequence, in the long term, their schooling is comparable to native student schooling.

The same happens for language proficiency. Mastering French<sup>26</sup> enables pupils to easily integrate into the Belgian educational system. Those students hence face lesser obstacles than other UFM. In other words, actors' agency is less required in their particular case (at least as regards schooling). Moreover, it is possible to presume that French-speaking students spend a shorter or even no time in reception classes and are able to join directly (or earlier) an ordinary class.

### **5.1. Schools' sphere of influence**

Schools and school personnel, due to their positionality and implication in the process, can deeply shape an unaccompanied minor's educational career. I purposely spoke about schools and school personnel. Indeed, although these concepts refer to the two sides of the same coin and they mutually influence each other, it is important to distinguish between them. Schools, understood as institutions, enjoy a large autonomy as far as DASPA/OKAN classes are concerned. Each institute has authority over the organisation and management of these classes<sup>27</sup>. Moreover, schools are often constrained in the limits of their network (linked to the organizing authority, that is, the city, FWB, or the Church).

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<sup>26</sup> According to the interviewees, it is the case of pupils coming from only French-speaking African countries. There are no minors who speak Dutch at the time of their arrival in Belgium

<sup>27</sup> It should be notice that some differences exist between DASPA class and OKAN class organisation. French-speaking system appears to be less structured, which leaves more autonomy to each school.

**Table 2 School personnel' coping mechanisms and source of influence**

Bending the rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Extending, unofficially, the duration of DASPA class</li> <li>- Developing strategies to circumnavigate the equivalence in favour of the pupil;</li> <li>- Circumnavigating the age test;</li> </ul>
Instrumental actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establishment of an orientation service;</li> <li>- Orienting, by default, towards the general track;</li> </ul>
Network effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The impact of network of belonging on pupils' orientation; how such impact is circumnavigated.</li> </ul>

Starting from organisation and management, schools are free to adjust the DASPA/OKAN classes that they organise according to their specific context. This leads to a highly diverse landscape: each school has its own division and organisation, both regarding the class level and the organisation of administrative work. The first effect of this autonomy is observed in the organisation and tiering of the DASPA/OKAN classes. Despite some similarities, each school has its own class subdivision, with the main criteria nevertheless being language proficiency and age. Class tiering improves learning mainly because the program can be adapted to the class level, but it is also intended to have a positive influence on pupils' motivation.

An illiterate pupil will spend two years in DASPA, which is why we have two literacy classes, a level 1 and a level 2, and we try to give them the symbolic impression that they have moved up a class and moved on in their career, because these are also young people who quickly become frustrated, so they really need to have the symbolic impression that they have moved up a class, otherwise we would lose them.

(M.A.V., DASPA coordinator, 11-04-2024)

Furthermore, the schools covered in this study display major differences regarding the subdivision of the reception class management. Indeed, 10 of the 14 schools composing the sample have DASPA/OKAN coordinators in charge of administrative follow-ups, pupils' reorientation and general management of the section. One school coordination function has three people, with each of them being responsible of a specific task. On the other hand, three schools do not have any general coordination function, which leads to work overload of the DASPA/OKAN personnel, as illustrated in my interviews with DASPA educators:

I've been working at this school for two years and there's no coordinator. As a result, I find myself doing administrative tasks as well as my work in the field. So, it's...It takes away time and the quality of my work is no longer the same. And I feel it, I feel it because I'm... All the time, I'm thinking, am I really doing my job properly? Have I achieved my objectives? Am I managing to help the students? And often



I realise that I'm not, because I'm more at my desk doing administrative tasks and that's blocking me. [...]  
I have the impression that in the end, I'm overwhelmed.

(A.A., DASPA educator, 15-05-2024).

A.A., being an educator, should be close to pupils on a daily basis. Moreover, she is in charge of keeping the relations with guardians, to inform them in case of major problems. As she testifies, the absence of a coordinator keeps her away from “the field”. As a consequence, she feels less capable of doing an adequate follow-up with pupils, while the relations with guardians (and, more generally, people outside of the school) are also less frequent.

Apart from organizational aspects, the school personnel, as will be later explained, tend to develop different coping mechanisms in favour of the pupils. Broadly speaking, my fieldwork shows that coping mechanisms occur in two major aspects of pupils' educational careers, namely their language proficiency and their orientation post reception class.

Specifically, these mechanisms range from bending the rules (e.g. extending unofficially the time of stay in a DASPA class<sup>28</sup>) to instrumental action (such as the creation of a post DASPA orientation service). It is interesting to underline that I also encountered more coping mechanisms amongst French-speaking school personnel, but almost none among the Dutch-speaking school personnel. However, this should be interpreted with caution, as the sample of this study was composed mainly by French-speaking schools, which could have biased the results. That said, there are also some systemic differences between the Dutch and French-speaking schools in the sample. Data collected during the field work show that the Flemish (Dutch speaking) system appears to be more structured and better able to cope with pupils' difficulties. Dutch-speaking school personnel appear to play more by the rules as the system offers them the necessary resources and flexibility. For instance, the system provides each pupil with a *Vervolgcoach* (follow-up coach) who assists and supports them all along the period in an OKAN class, while also helping them to establish a life project, facilitating the post-OKAN orientation. There are no such follow-up coaches in the francophone panorama, which forces the school personnel to develop instructional mechanisms to cope with the situation.

As mentioned, language proficiency is one of the biggest obstacles to non-French/non-Dutch-speaking unaccompanied minors' educational careers. The length of the DASPA/OKAN class is, in some cases, not enough to provide those students with a sufficient command of the language that enables them to join an ordinary class afterwards. The school personnel have therefore developed several coping mechanisms (including both bending the rules and instructional mechanisms) to provide students in need with extra language support.

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<sup>28</sup> I haven't found such coping mechanism in Dutch-speaking schools. This is due to the fact that OKAN personnel can extend the stay in OKAN if necessary. See *infra*

Language learning depends on the abilities of each student. At the end of the reception classes, not all students achieve a sufficiently high level of language proficiency to be able to follow regular courses with ease. As explained by Lucchini et al (2011), the duration of the reception class is not always sufficient to allow an adequate knowledge of the language. In order to overcome this problem, teachers may extend officially or unofficially a student's stay in reception class. Indeed, a clear difference between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking systems exists in this regard. The former allows OKAN personnel to officially extend pupils stay in OKAN class as much as is needed. Yet, the French-speaking system does not allow for such exceptions. The duration of a DASPA class duration is fixed at 18 months (or 24 months for illiterate pupils). In order to overcome this restrictive measure, the school personnel can bend the rules in favour of students, by unofficially extending their stay in the reception class. Indeed, it is a common practice to allow some pupils to continue their language learning in a DASPA class, what school personnel call the "unofficial students". It is an arrangement developed among teachers according to which pupils are officially registered to ordinary classes, although they still take some or all of their courses in a DASPA class. The amount of time that each pupil spends in reception and ordinary class is thus fitted to their specific needs.

In general, the period spent in reception classes does not exceed 2.5 years. This is because, although reception classes help pupils to make progress in language proficiency, it also prevents them from progressing in their educational career. Moreover, students may feel stuck, which can lead to a drop in their motivation.

In contrast with the measures presented above, one school included in my sample displays a stricter position of staying within the limits imposed by the law, thus not allowing pupils to extend unofficially their time in a DASPA class. In order to provide foreign pupils and UFM's with extra educational support, this school opted for an instructional action. DASPA funding includes a certain number of hours in co-teaching, that is, a certain number of hours during which two teachers should give lessons jointly in a DASPA class. In order to provide a better support to all those students who transitioned from reception to ordinary classes, the co-teaching hours are used in the ordinary class rather than in DASPA classes. Specifically, a French teacher assists the ordinary classes by supporting pupils with language difficulties. This solution has two main advantages: first, pupils are integrated in the ordinary class. Despite language difficulties, they can progress in other subjects and join the ordinary educational system. Second, pupils do not accumulate absences (as it happens in the official/unofficial solutions mentioned above). In turn however, the solution implemented by this specific school seems to offer less support to pupils who have important educational gaps and specific needs.

The last strategy identified during the field work could be improperly defined as a coping mechanism. Students having attention deficit and/or any kind of disorder could benefit from specialised educational accompaniment (differentiated track). Unaccompanied minors, due to their life history and migration journey, often suffer from post-traumatic stress and/or other forms of trauma, which could affect their

learning process. Thus, they may benefit from differentiated tracks. In addition to a structured learning path, differentiated tracks offer pupils the possibility of being in small classes (around 10 pupils per class) that can ensure a closer follow-up. Whenever an actor perceives that a pupil may have attention deficit and/or any kind of disorder, they may request CPMS (Psycho-medico-social centres, *Centres psycho-médico-sociaux*) to carry out an assessment granting the minor the possibility to join a differentiated track.

In some cases, schools or shelters ask the [C]PMS to carry out an assessment so that the young person can be referred to a special school. So, they do an assessment, they ask questions, they do a little examination, and then they try to get the young person into I don't know what type of special education [...] that allows them access to schools where there are small classes of about ten pupils and where there are options that they can't do in an ordinary school. [...] So, it allows them to open up other streams and to be better taken care of than in a class of 25 people where they're not going to make it.

(E.C. employed guardian, 07-05-2024)

### **5.1.1. Orientation post reception class**

As explained previously, after the period in the reception class, UFM's join an ordinary class. Orientation (as to which class/track should be joined) is based on: prior studies equivalence and/or the decision of the integration council. In both cases, the school personnel play a prominent role in the process as they can orient pupils toward specific schools or tracks and can also circumvent the rules in order to obtain a more suitable solution for minors. The data that I collected show that pupils' orientation is influenced by three main aspects: (a) first, all forms of coping mechanisms which directly influence pupils' orientation (b) instrumental action developed by French-speaking schools to compensate for the lack of an role equivalent to the Dutch-speaking follow-up coach (*Vervolgcoach*); (c) the last one concerns the influence of networks (i.e. the network to which the school belongs) in school choices.

#### Circumnavigating the rules

School personnel develop different "bending the rules" mechanisms. Such mechanisms vary from circumnavigating the equivalence to strategies in to cope with age testing. The strategies described below cannot be further grouped since they are derived from the day-to-day experiences of the school personnel, and indeed some are specific to one school only.

The first strategy, which can be called *circumnavigating the equivalence* seeks to cope with particularly unfavourable educational equivalence cases. When a pupil is in possession of all necessary documents, schools are compelled to establish the equivalence of pupil's prior studies. The orientation post DASPA/OKAN class will no longer depend on the school personnel, since the pupil can only be enrolled in a class equivalent to his/her level of study. Equivalence may be detrimental to the pupil's future education, as it does not take into account other factors including the pupil's personal goals or age.

So, if the student arrives here with reports on the last three years, a passport, complete administrative papers. We send the documents to the French community, *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* now. And they send us the equivalence of their level between their country and Belgium. So, this really is an official document, there's nothing we can do about it. We have equivalences for children who have 17 years of first common year [the first year of secondary school]. So, this is an official document. We have to follow it. We sometimes try to get round the rule, but we have to follow it. We're trying here, we have a 16-year-old student who has her first commune. So, we can send her to a CEFA. We can't send her to traditional secondary education, but as she's 16, she can join a CEFA. It's just... it's really the only solution we have at the moment.

(M.A. DASPA teacher and coordinator, 22-04-2024)

In the case presented above, equivalence is particularly disadvantageous for the pupil as it obliges her to join the first year of high school. Thus, the pupil should integrate a class composed by student of 12 years old, which represent a potential loss of 4 years. According to the teacher, this would certainly lead to school dropout as the pupil would be confronted with peers four years younger than her. Moreover, the unfavourable equivalence would extend the student's education by another 6 years up to completion of secondary school. M.A. was afraid that this would represent a too big a hurdle for the girl to face. As consequence, she has been oriented toward the vocational training.

Schools can cope with a specific problem related to the condition of unaccompanied minors, such as the doubt about their age. As explained above, in case of doubt, an age test should be carried out within the first hours upon the arrival of the minor in Belgium. In reality, however, minors may be subjected to an age test even months after their arrival. In the meantime, various procedures may have already been initiated, including their school enrolment.

Once a minor enrolled in a school is declared to be an adult following an age test, he/she loses all rights related to his/her child status, which may represent an obstacle to their subsequent educational career. Indeed, according to interviewed shelter workers, education not being compulsory anymore, schools oppose the enrolment of such adults<sup>29</sup>. However, the person still has the right to pursue an educational career but they will be obliged to pay school tuition fees (in case of unaccompanied minors housed in a shelter, school fees are covered by shelter itself, see below). Therefore, in case of an age test during the academic year, the school personnel may ask for an equivalence based on age in order to allow the pupil not to lose his/her progress. In this case, the pupil will so be reoriented towards a vocational training stream.

Last year, one day I get a call to say that a certain pupil's age has been corrected. So, I don't know if it's because there's no DASPA registration, but it's because he lied at registration, so you're out of the DASPA

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<sup>29</sup> Adults can enrol to school, but not being anymore compelled to school obligation, they will have to pay a tuition

class tomorrow. You've got 24 hours to get equivalence. Obviously, we work with these young people, we create links with them, it's very difficult. So, what did we do? We immediately phoned the equivalence office and asked for an equivalence based on age. And so, unfortunately, it was a young person who was integrating at the end of the second level, and he found himself in the third vocational level. Because an equivalence based on age is either in the first general year or in the third vocational year. Since we had the joke with the students who had been thrown out of the DASPA overnight, I've been asking [to all my students] to come and tell me as soon as they have to take an age test. Because at the end of the day, when you're 11 months into DASPA or whatever, you can try to get them regularised before the age test result. [...] And so I tell them, guys, if at some point we come looking for you to have an age test, you come and tell me straight away. You don't wait for the result [...] because then we analyse the file a bit and if it's a student who's doing a bit well, which we've already done, it's an official class change and not an unofficial one. But otherwise, there's no change of class. So, in fact, officially, he's not in DASPA, but he continues to take the language classes, but officially, he's going to enrol in another class.

(E.R., DASPA personnel, 22-04-2024)

### Instrumental actions

Contrary to the Flemish (Dutch-speaking) system, the French-speaking one does not have a function or role specialised in accompanying and guiding students (the Dutch follow-up coach). Consequently, the responsibilities regarding pupils' follow-up and orientation are informally shared out among school personnel, leading to an excessive workload for professionals and lack of quality support for pupils, especially UFM's who requires special attention due to their situation.

Foreign students (whether UFM's or not) are often not aware of all possibilities that the Belgian education system has to offer.

There was a real need because students in DASPA, whether MENAs or not, don't know the schools in Belgium. We felt there was a real need here. And what's more, explaining to them the different options they have for the future depending on their individual situation... And as I used to be a teacher of French as a Foreign Language, I know how... Which type of school to enrol them in, this side rather than the other. We get advice that's closer to them, that's more personalised.

(B.F. retired DASPA teacher and volunteer at the orientation service, 14-04-2024)

In order to fill this gap, the reception class personnel developed different forms of instrumental actions. Due to the lack of a specific framework and thanks to the autonomy that the school personnel enjoy, each school developed its own strategy in line with its resources and possibilities. Despite the existing differences among schools, it is possible to group orientation instrumental actions into two types. The first, and more widespread, coping mechanism, developed by four schools out of five, consists in appointing a teacher as orientation counsellor beyond the tasks related to his or her profession. In particular, two schools developed an orientation desk held by a logopaedist and a retired French teacher on one case and on the other by a history teacher (not from the DASPA class).

This coping mechanism often stems from a “bottom-up” dynamic that derives from an individual’s willingness and initiative. This is, for instance, the case of C.B, a DASPA teacher and orientation counsellor.

Apparently, there isn't the budget or whatever for... To set up this function. [...] So, this is a bit unofficial. It came about because we realised that... We were letting the students down... That was last year. We were dropping students like that in immersion classes, so normal classes. In fact, we just didn't know if things were going well. The teacher had a bit of feedback here and there. We, well... Well, it wasn't part of the job. And in fact, I don't remember, but it was a thought that I had... Well, I had a 10-hour [of co-teaching], so with colleagues, why not take care of it? And that's how it happened. Becoming an orientation counsellor kind of fell into place because... At first, it was just a matter of seeing how things were going. And then, after a while, I realized that... Well, the job was changing a bit. And I even became a bit of a psychologist, sometimes, I was there... I'm not in the process of going beyond anything, but... Because sometimes, they tell me very personal things and I say to myself, but it's not right, really, because maybe I'm talking nonsense. I don't know. Yeah, it's a bit complicated.

(C.B. DASPA teacher, 14-05-2024)

Regardless of the presence or absence of an orientation counsellor, it is interesting to highlight that UFM's are often oriented toward a professional track and/or vocational training. Very few are oriented toward higher tracks. According to several interviewed teachers, the reason behind this choice is mainly dictated by poor language mastery. Indeed, while talking about UFM's, most teachers refer to UFM's as students that lack basic knowledge and have important language skill gaps that prevent their continuation of schooling in higher tracks.

The second instrumental action detected has been developed by only one school (Cardinal Mercier) in the sample. In this specific case, students in the DASPA class are considered as a whole group. Instead of planning each pupil’s DASPA path individually, the school seeks to create a group which will follow a common path from the beginning of the DASPA class until the orientation phase.

But it's true that with more traditional groups [...] we are more on the rails where there's a group, there's about fifteen of them and they're going to be channelled fairly easily, even sometimes without any real individual choice. [...] well generally there's a third or fourth general and then that's it, that's more the profile of large class groups which work well.

(V.V.B, DASPA teacher, 11-04-2024)

Hence, in this specific case, the school personnel treat the DASPA pupils as a whole group, taking advantage of the relationship that pupils have established within the class group. It seems that these dynamic favours the pupil’s educational achievement, due to, among other factors, peer effect. This hypothesis should be further tested. Focusing on orientation, DASPA pupils are, by default, oriented towards the general track. This choice could seem, at first glance, in contrast with the general trend. As revealed by interviews, school personnel tend to orient unaccompanied minors, and more generally

DASPA students, towards lower tracks because of the lack of language proficiency. A more accurate analysis shows that the strategy of orientation towards a general track is dictated by two reasons: first, the willingness to offer those pupils a broader range of future opportunities; and second, to counteract the difficulties linked to language.

[In our school] they usually go, the students who leave DASPA, they will mostly continue studies in general track and in the school because in the school we put really a whole kind of small tutoring so we really follow them and then until the CESS. There the class of 6th general now they are 22 or 23 and they are only former DASPA. [...] It has become a bit the norm we send very few students in technical [track] so our technical section here it was a little unfamiliar with DASPA because it is not so much concerned, we do not have many students who make this choice here and on the other hand we also have a lot of students who choose the professional and there is still a little laborious work to sensitize teachers to this audience so that we can offer a support a little comfortable. After in general too it was very difficult at a time it's just that we had the numerical weight because in fact without us there is no general here and so our strength is that we are the ones who support the sector so it allowed us to impose a little.

(M.A.V. DASPA teacher and coordinator, 11-04-2024)

This choice is also part of a broader strategy that the DASPA personnel have put in place. Specifically, as explained by M.A.V., using numerical weight as leverage, teachers could gain in autonomy and could also “impose a little”. Specifically, they heightened the awareness of ordinary classes’ teachers to the difficulties inherent to unaccompanied minors and foreign pupils in general, mainly their linguistic difficulties. This work led to the acceptance that foreign pupils can use online translators during exams in order to get a better comprehension of what is required of them.

We say you only see a small percentage of what they can do because obviously their language level doesn't allow them to show everything, they know everything they can do etc [...] in physics you have to look to see if they can do their calculations. In that case, French shouldn't be an obstacle, so your exercise shouldn't be formulated in a way that's too complicated in French, so that the French prevents him from doing the exercise, you have to select carefully what you're assessing

(M.A.V. DASPA teacher and coordinator, 11-04-2024)

### Network influence

The last aspect which may influence UFM's orientation is the network the school belong to. Specifically, schools are part of different organisational networks. This division influences, negatively, the relations between schools, with little inter-network communication and partnerships. Schools tend to develop partnership and relations only with schools of the same network. This has a direct impact on pupils' orientation. In particular, once a pupil should be reoriented towards a different school than the one in which they would be enrolled in the DASPA/OKAN class, the DASPA personnel are under pressure to orient the pupil toward a school belonging to the same official network.

C.B

Last year, a colleague and I gave a lot of addresses to a girl who really wanted to do hard sciences and so on. And it was quite difficult in Brussels, because my colleague knew the schools well. He said, I don't like that, I don't like that. He said, these are not good schools. He gave us lots of other schools. And normally, you can't do too much. [...] Yeah, there aren't going to be too many partnerships, in any case. There are always these questions of... The school has to keep as many pupils as possible. There's always that to take into account too. Sometimes, when they're 17 or 18, I think they're more suited to social promotion or to studying with adults. Sometimes I talk to the director about it and she says, no, if he can stay... Like, he's 18, we understand that he wants to be with adults.

Interviewer

So there are administrative and financial constraints too.

C.B.

Yes, that's right. But more networking, let's say. Networking, who can't communicate too much. Yeah, it's complicated. *voilà*. I can't even tell which school belongs to what. But I look on the Internet. I ask my colleagues if this school is good or not and recommend it. That's how it works. Whether it's the official I or something else, I don't know. It's just that I can't have much contact with them. But I can give it to the student. After that, they can do what they want with it. In itself, it's just information. We'd made sheets for some students. After that, you have to give the sheet, but not interfere too much.

(C.B. DASPA teacher, 14-05-2024)

Thus, being part of a specific network can limit UFM's' orientation, as school personnel seems to be constrained to orient pupils primarily to schools within their own network.

This could show that it depends more on their agency and how much time they are willing to invest in order to research about other networks. As is demonstrated by the extract below:

Interviewer

when you reorient [a student], do you limit yourself to schools that are part of the same network as you?

B.F & P.D.T

No, no, not at all. No, not at all. What counts is the level, the options first. That's all. We have students who already want to go. Some already have very specific desires. There are students we have to guide towards the fourth, fifth and sixth years who already have very specific career aspirations. Oh yes. And so... No, no. We go into the open as in... We also do research. With the ONEM. There are some who do training for adults, etc., those who are 18 years old, and so on. We really guide them everywhere.

(B.F retired DASPA teacher and volunteer at the orientation service, & P.D.T  
logopaedist and in charge of the orientation service 14-04-2024)



What differentiates these two schools? First of all, they belong to two different networks, the first belongs to the official state network and is managed by the municipality, while the second is part of the free network and managed by the Catholic Church. Another important difference between them is related to the professional's posture. Indeed, in the first case, C.B. is a young teacher, who has been working in the school for two years, but she took over the role of orientation counsellor only recently. On the other side, the orientation service is managed by two people with more experience - B.F., already retired, and P.D.T. who has been working in the school for more than twenty years. It is likely that B.F. and P.D.T.'s greater knowledge of the system allows them to bypass institutional obstacles. Further studies may examine that in more depth.

## 5.2. Guardians' spheres of influence

As previously mentioned, due to the shortage of guardians a significant amount of time may elapse between the child's entry into care and the appointment of a legal guardian. Currently, the delay is estimated between three to six months<sup>30</sup>. In the case of minors housed in a shelter, school enrolment is often carried out by shelter workers without the guardian's involvement or even their agreement.

Often, at least for me most of the young people were, when I was appointed guardian, already enrolled in a school. Whether they were with a family or in a shelter. In general, the shelter had already enrolled them, and so had the family.

(K.K. employed guardian, 16-05-2024)

Guardians are subject to a broad legal framework which grants them an important level of autonomy and discretion over their tasks and roles, including unaccompanied minors' educational follow-up (as a reminder, guardians are obliged to ensure that pupils are enrolled in school). Legal vagueness increments the impact that guardians can have over unaccompanied minors' education. In particular, guardians' approach to schooling appears to be directly related to their status and personal experiences. According to these characteristics it is possible to divide the sample into three categories: (a) employed guardians; (b) retired volunteer guardians; (c) professional volunteer guardians. Despite the existence of some commonalities, each group has a different relationship with pupils as well as a different agency. For these reasons, the three groups will be at first presented individually before analysing some commonalities.

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<sup>30</sup> *Comment et quand est désigné mon tuteur MENA ? | Droits Quotidiens - Le langage juridique clair.*  
<https://www.droitsquotidiens.be/fr/question/comment-et-quand-est-designe-mon-tuteur-mena>. Las

**Table 3 Guardians classification and coping mechanisms**

Employed guardians	Retired volunteer guardians	Professional volunteer Guardians
<p>Employees of an association (either Caritas guardianship service or SESO). In charge of 25 pupils each.</p> <p>Due to high workload, employed guardians tend to get less involved in UFM’s educational career</p>	<p>Pensioners who became guardians voluntarily; in charge of between 4 and 10 pupils.</p> <p>Strongly involved in minors’ educational career. In some cases, this may lead to excessive behaviours</p>	<p>UFMs’ sector professionals (either shelter workers or reception class teacher) who become guardians voluntarily. In charge of between 4 and 10 pupils.</p> <p>Their attitude towards education is influenced by their profession.</p>
<b>Coping mechanisms</b>		
<p>Ration the service:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Delegating their power of attorney</li> <li>- Refusing unnecessary requests</li> </ul>	<p>Employing personal resources (both economic and time);</p>	<p>School choice is dictated by pupils’ legal status and asylum procedure;</p>

The first group of employed guardians is formed by employees who work for an association (SESO or Caritas). Due to subsidy-related agreement, employed guardians are in charge of at least 25 pupils each, which represents a high workload. Furthermore, Caritas (and, to lesser extent, SESO) provides guardians with training and support for particularly complicated cases. Employed guardians deal with a complex and stressful work environment characterised by high workload and resource scarcity (mainly time). As a result, in contrast to the citizen-agent narrative that they display, employed guardians are more likely to develop “moving away from the client coping mechanisms” and, more specifically, routinization and service rationing.

Similarly to shelter workers, employed guardians engage in a relational agency with schools. Hence, whenever they are in charge of school choice and enrolment, employed guardians tend to enrol pupils in the schools that they know and are used to working with. This allows a better communication and lesser conflict between schools and guardians.

In particular, employed guardians tend to “ration their services”: due to resource scarcity, whenever possible, employed guardians engage in tasks and procedures that are exclusively under their responsibility, e.g., asylum application and any other legal procedure, to the detriment of other responsibilities such as education. As such, employed guardians appear to be the less engaged in pupils’

education. Indeed, they have developed a routinization process which consists of intentionally delegating their power of attorney to shelter workers and host families in order to reduce their own workload.

When children are in a host family, recognized by Mentor Jeunes<sup>31</sup>, then [we delegate responsibilities to the host family]. And there are three powers of attorney. Medical power of attorney, education power of attorney and administrative power of attorney in which the host family is given the power to take steps for young people. As a result, there are many families who take care of picking up schools, contacting schools. And when it all goes well, so do we, we're kind of in the background. And we send, in any case, here to Caritas, I think it is above all, it is rather this practice to send an email, to tell the school that we are the guardians, that we can be contacted in case of emergency.

(Employed guardian, 13-05-202)

Delegating their power of attorney is not the only coping mechanism employed to ration services. Employed guardians may also develop coping mechanism and behaviours “against the client”, that is avoid indulging pupils’ requests which are considered to be unnecessary. In other words, employed guardians may take advantage of their authority over UFM’s to avoid accepting any request they consider to be unnecessary and a supplementary burden for their work.

I have a young girl who wanted to change schools and I told her that it didn't seem sensible to me for her to change schools when she was about to start her ah no she had started in September um she was in the first month of her final year so the sixth form she wanted to change school to be closer to her home but um I didn't do it, no. [...] at that point I had a lot of guilt about it but I didn't want to change school because I didn't want to change school. at that time I had a lot of guardianship I think it also depends if you don't have a lot of guardianship if you have a lot of time at that time I took the choice well I made the choice not to enter into her request and the young person herself had said no but I have the right to choose the school I go to and I told her sorry but I'm the one who has to sign I'm not going to do it so no they can't always choose unfortunately for them um yes that's how it is.

(employed guardians, 13-05-2024)

The second sub-group of the sample is composed of retired volunteer guardians. They have between four and 10 pupils under their responsibility. These volunteer retired guardians are highly educated retired people who spent most of their life abroad. Their commitment as guardians derives from time availability and their life experience abroad, which gives them a sense of closeness with migrants. The paternal narrative of retired guardians seems particularly interesting, as they often have grandchildren of the same age as the minors under their guardianship.

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<sup>31</sup> Mentor Jeunes is a not-for-profit organisation whose aim is to put UFM’s in touch with host families as part of the FWB’s ‘Plan MENA’ project. For further information, see: <https://www.mentorjeunes.be/>

As such, the retired guardians that I interviewed tend to relate and treat their pupils as if they were their own children or grandchildren. This strongly influences their relationship with pupils and, more generally, their approach to education. They tend to establish a relationship that goes beyond the usual guardian-pupil framework, which includes spending time doing leisure activities, but also sharing part of their private life. For instance, this extract of the interview with B.V (09-05-2024) is illustrative of that:

He goes to the swimming pool from time to time. He likes that and everything. But it's not easy. But I have a good relationship with him. [...] He wants to go to the cinema. He wants to go to the cinema all the time. But it's not easy because there aren't cinemas in Arabic, they don't know French very well. So, they get bored. We go to the cinema. After 10 minutes, it bores me. I don't understand anything. And he wants to leave the cinema. And well, at that point, it cost me dearly. So, I arranged for us to go and see the film. And after 10 minutes, he's annoyed. I took him to Waterloo, to the Lion's Hill.

Due to their personal background and life experiences, retired volunteer guardians consider education as an essential aspect of a pupil's life and future and an important step toward their integration in Belgium. For these reasons, they closely follow the pupils' educational careers, intervening when they consider it necessary.

As regards school choice and enrolment, retired guardians base their choice on pupils' life projects and preferences, but also their own experience with (and opinions about) schools. Unlike other guardians, retired volunteers have no specific time constraints or excessive workload. For these reasons, they usually do take the time to explore with their pupils all the opportunities that each pupil has, in order to make, whenever possible, the most appropriate choice. They seek pupils' best interests and encourage them. Retired guardians hence develop a coping mechanism "in favour of the client" which includes going beyond the minimum standards that the law imposes. In order to select the most appropriate school, retired guardians take the time to visit the institutes with the pupils, meeting the teachers, acting therefore as parents would be expected to do for their children. This quote from the interview with H.N. (13/05/2024) highlights the retired guardian's narrative and view regarding school selection:

If you're lucky enough to have to choose a school, for example, now is the time to register for the school year. September. So, you've got a lot of choices. That's fine. And then, you can go and select schools that are as suitable as possible. What you think of as a tutor that's the best possible fit. [...] if you're in time for registration, now's the time. That's when you can go looking for schools. You can look at the schools you can choose from. And so, it would only be one if we imagined that we were going to the ideal school, according to which criteria the choice is made. It's mainly based on the young person, what they want to do, their abilities, what they've done. And this is done through discussions. We get to know the young person, build up a relationship of trust, and try to guess what his or her future might be in Belgium. What could be the paths, the avenues where he can blossom, where he can build a future for himself. What abilities, what interests. If he likes science, we'll steer him towards a more scientific school. So, it all depends very, very much on what you can guess about the young person. The older he is, the more you

can guess. Yes. If he's 15, 16 years old, we've already got marked areas of interest. Does he like sports? But it's not easy. I have a youngster, for example, who's going to turn 16 in November, and for me, he has above-average learning skills at school. He's very good. He adapts. He learns very quickly. But on the other hand, he has no ambition. Ah, yes. He says, "No, me, a little training in hairdressing, for example." So we have to talk. You have to compensate. We need to discuss each other's abilities and desires. Try to pull them along. I try. I try to pull him like I would my children. Pull him along. Pull him up. In Belgium, if you have the ability to study, you have to. But on the other hand, if he doesn't want to, I'm not going to do it.

The last identified group is formed by professional volunteers, i.e., professionals who work directly in contact with unaccompanied minors. In my sample, this includes DASPA teachers, shelter personnel and a project officer at the MENA Coordination of the Red Cross. The specificity of professional volunteer guardians lies in their dual role. During the interviews, guardians belonging to this group explained that their decision to become guardians stems from their experiences with a dysfunctional system and failing guardianships.

I've always been involved with migrants. I have a lot of migrant friends. I'm involved in associations and various groups; I've hosted migrants and minors in my house... Do you know about the Maximilian Park occupancy which happens some years ago? I was there too; I was part of the creation of the *Plateforme Citoyenne*. Moreover, with M.A.V. we created an ASBL. But never in the world I've thought of becoming a guardian. Then we started to reflect with M.A.V., at school we see a lot of guardians who just don't care, who are absent. So, I started to think, if I were a guardian, I would do this that and that, I know how it works. So, I've decided to become a guardian myself.

(N.A., teacher and professional volunteer guardian, 30-05-2024)

Professional volunteer guardians' attitude and approach to schooling is strongly influenced by their positionality as workers. In particular, DASPA teacher guardians, such as N.A., strongly engage in pupils' education. They tend to be present and pushing pupils toward schooling, even employing their authority. In other words, their positionality as teachers influences their vision of the educational system and outcomes.

On the other hand, FEDASIL or Red-Cross professional volunteer guardians tend to display an approach similar to that of shelter workers, with some differences related to their specific function. When it comes to school selection, guardians working for one of these two institutions tend to influence pupils' school selection based on their previous experiences with schools or the relationship they may have with the school personnel. In some cases, school choices are dictated by extra-educational factors. For example, L.D., a shelter worker and professional volunteer guardian testifies that, in his view, the school is a means of integration, but also a means of "getting the papers". In particular, he developed a strategy to increase the chances of his Afghani pupils of obtaining international protection status by enrolling them in Catholic schools. In case pupils were expatriated and sent back to Afghanistan, having been enrolled

in a Catholic school and having taken part in Catholic feasts may be considered as a reason for persecution. This argument is then employed as an argument in favour of granting the minor residency status.

I see school as a mean for integration. Yes, but it's also a mean for getting the papers, eh, let's put it like it is. [...] But up until now, all my young Afghani have all gone to a Catholic school, even though they all have Muslim religious convictions. But for the [the ruling political group in] Afghanistan, following another religion isn't good, so it can be a protective factor here in Belgium. And so, to say that the pupil has been subjected to the Catholic religion for a year, and has taken part in Easter, St Nicholas' Day and other rites of passage from one religion to another, in the event of a return to Afghanistan, at least in all the judgments handed down so far involving my young people, this is something that has been raised [during application analysis].

(L.D. shelter worker and professional volunteer guardian, 28-05-2024).

Beyond specific group patterns, it is interesting to focus on the guardians' narratives and posture. As previously explained, all interviewees, guardians included, exhibit a citizen-agent narrative. That is, regardless of their status, all interviewed guardians emphasise that they act taking into account pupils' wishes, targeting their wellbeing. However, focusing on the guardians' discourse, some inconsistencies appear. Discrepancies between guardians' citizen-agent narrative and their speech/actions can be attributed to the specific positionality they hold. Guardians, contrary to other actors, have parental authority over UFM's, without being their parents. As regard to UFM's schooling, they have an in-between position, where they can (and have) to push minors in a direction which guardians perceive as being the best for their future. This position leads to some crossing-the-line positions and actions. One extract from the interview with H.N. is illustrative of this point. While talking about school orientation and pupils' life projects, H.N. explained how he tends to guide (and to some extent push) pupils toward a life project. In particular, talking about school choices and educational career, H.N. explained that he tends to establish a path for his pupils according to what he understands about them and their interests. In particular, one phrase caught my attention. Talking about a new guardianship, he said "I haven't yet decided what [the pupil] should do".

Guardians tend to display an authoritarian posture especially in the case of school dropouts. In particular, they can exert their parental authority in a manner which could be considered as "crossing the line", that is, going beyond one's role as a guardian and acting as a real parent.

I had a few cases like that of dropping out of school. I had a case where the young person was not feeling well. The school was far away. He was supposed to be on a bus for three-quarters of an hour. He had a headache. So, I moved him to a different centre. And now he's going to school. I have another young person who was completely out of school. In fact, it was a guardianship that I took over from another. And then I forced him to go to school. He took it back. And now it looks good. I realize you have to be firm. And there are others who go, who strictly respect. Others who are on the verge of dropping out. So, they do it to please the tutors. But I feel that if the tutor is not there, they will totally drop out.

My technique is money. You don't go to school, you don't get your [pocket] money, that's it.

(L.D. 28-05-2024)

It should be noticed that not all guardians have shown similar behaviour. Some tutors seem to be really supportive and aware of their position as guardians and not as parents. These differences are due to each person's character and their own way of interpreting their role as guardians.

### 5.3. Shelters' spheres of influence

As previously mentioned, shelters are responsible for accompanying minors toward an independent life. Education is an important aspect of this process. Similarly to guardians, shelters are directly involved in pupils' school selection, enrolment and follow-up.

**Table 4 Shelter workers' coping mechanisms**

Relational agency	- Establishing purposely relations with schools facilitating professional work but also pupils educational career;
Pupil legal status	- Minors whose asylum procedure are unsuccessful are oriented toward vocational training
Bending the rule in favour of adult minors	- Circumnavigating the age test, enrolling to school minors who have been declared adult; - Keeping pupil within the same shelter in order to facilitate their educational career.

School selection depends on different factors. First, it is related to pupils' interests and life projects. Indeed, shelters, specifically MENA accompaniers and school representative, support minors in establishing their life projects. Through dialogues and daily interaction, the shelter personnel seek to evaluate minors' life goals and interests in order to help them in the school choice process. Pupils' preferences depend on the language of schooling and on general orientation. If minors do not have a specific preference regarding their future profession, they are enrolled in a DASPA/OKAN class, so that a specific choice is only made afterwards.

Second, the school selection also depends on shelter personnel's agency and relational agency. Indeed, although shelter personnel and guardians share similar responsibilities, their agency and, consequently, their influence over UFM's educational careers differ. This difference is attributable, among other factors, to shelters' geographical and temporal roots. Whereas guardianship is not localised, i.e. guardians are responsible for pupils located all over Belgium, shelters are located in a given area and have been operating for several years. This local anchorage enables them to forge relations with local

actors – particularly with schools - leading to the establishment of partnerships and shortcuts. *Thus*, shelters and schools’ personnel engage in a relational agency.

It takes time to understand for a school how it works and for a shelter how it works [...] Each has its own way of working, so [...] we do a little debriefing with whom we work for a lot of pupils, to see how we can improve communication, what the sticking points are, and so on, [...] Once we've got to know each other well, we can call up this or that person. Yes, that works pretty well. And we've been working with the same schools for a long time, by chance, it's often the same people who've been working there for a long time. So, a relationship is created and they know very well how we operate here. We know very well how they work, and so it avoids, in quotation marks, difficulties in understanding the reality of each child. [...] Inevitably, we also tend to work with schools with whom things are going well and with whom we're used to work, and so there are schools with whom we don't work, either because they're very far away and it's a geographical question, or because from past experience, [the] contact is difficult and so, to make life easier, we prefer to work with schools we're used to working with.

(M.F. shelter worker, 06-05-2024)

The experience of the Dilbeek shelter is, in this sense, particularly interesting as it shows the effect of relational agency. The shelter has been open for two years and the team has occupied the post for less than a year - hence, not long enough to develop fruitful local partnerships. The orientation is only based on pupils’ preferences and, partially, their life goals. In particular, the answers that my interviewees provided can be qualified as institutionalised and framed, that is, strongly based on (and similar to) the federal guidelines on unaccompanied minors’ reception and care.

Interviewer

Apart from the distance and the preferences of boys, are there other criteria in the choice of school? Because you said that you choose a school depending on the distance, also the desire of young people. Are there other criteria? I don't know if you have a good relationship with the school or not, or if it's just a question of...

Dilbeek shelter

We don't have a lot of choices, I think. I have to ask where there are free places, and with that, we have to make a choice. It's the only thing I can do. The distance and the choice of boys, that's the only criterion.

Thus, shelters and schools’ relational agency has an impact on workers. It facilitates conflict avoidance and reduces the potential sources of misunderstanding, which “make life easier”. This relational agency also influences UFMs’ educational careers. In particular, shelter personnel orient (and enrol) pupils in schools with whom they have already established a relation. Consequently, while this reduces pupils’ range of possible choices, it also avoids potential obstacles. First, shelters enrol pupils in schools which are aware of UFMs’ specific needs and difficulties (such as prolonged absences, frequent delays, but also language difficulties). Second, prior positive relations between shelters and schools means that



problems such as lack of place in reception classes can be avoided. In particular, depending on the period of the year, finding a place in reception classes may be a difficult task:

It's true that the difficulty of finding a place is also periodic. Yes. If it's near the start of school, it's still okay. Let's say July, August, it's still okay. You can find a place. At the start of the school year too, after a month, we can, in October, November, we can find places. But in the middle of the year, it's a bit complicated. But with the contacts we have, we can always find a place. Generally speaking, for DASPA, we always find a place.

(M.S., shelter worker, 11-05-2024)

Moreover, the shelter orientation does not only take into account pupils' future educational careers, but it also depends on the minor's situation regarding the asylum procedure. Hence, shelter workers' broader reflection is guided not only by educational opportunities for minors, but also (and in some cases, especially) the pupils' future in the country. In other words, shelter personnel tend to select schools according to the impact that such choice could play on pupils' asylum procedures. Thus, if a pupil has little hope of obtaining international protection status, he/she will be redirected toward a CEFA or another kind of vocational training, which will increase their chances to find a job and, consequently, access the exceptional regularization procedure for foreign nationals established by article 9bis 1980-12-15/30 law<sup>32</sup>.

We avoid changing schools as much as possible because schooling can be of interest for the [minor' asylum] procedure too. Having the chance to have teachers we've worked with for four years three years can favour certain things in relation to the person's procedure too. Because if things get stuck somewhere they're resource people who can testify and in fact, if it has to be regularized somewhere, this person usually also intervenes, yes, because they've worked with a young person, so there are all these options there, yes, also in terms of general options, general choice, technical, professional, CEFA - we try to play on that, depending on the young person's procedure. We try to play on that depending on the person's procedure, too, because at a given point, if we see that the procedure is almost totally over, we only have the CEFA option to be able to keep the young person, because if a young person is enrolled in a sandwich course and has a boss, there's a law that says that unless this person can keep going, they must continue their studies until they turn 21<sup>33</sup>. So, there are no orders to leave the country until they're 21. At that point, if the employer promises to hire them where they're doing their work experience, a regularization procedure can be set in motion as well. These are all parameters we try to keep within.

(M.S. shelter worker, 11-05-2024).

A last coping mechanism linked to school enrolment concerns minors who are declared adults following an age test. Indeed, despite their real age, if minors are declared as being adults, they will be treated as

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<sup>32</sup>In exceptional circumstances, and provided that the foreign national is in possession of an identity document, a residence permit may be requested from the mayor of the locality where the foreign national is staying. Art 9bis Law on access to the territory, residence, settlement and removal of foreign nationals <https://www.ejustice.just.fgov.be/eli/loi/1980/12/15/1980121550/justel>. Last consulted on 7th July 2024.

<sup>33</sup> <https://dofi.ibz.be/fr/themes/protection-internationale/vulnerables/procedure-solution-durable/suivi-projet-de-vie>

such, which has consequences on pupils' rights. Focusing on schooling, education will no longer be compulsory for them. Practically speaking, this also implies that the person willing to undertake an educational career must bear the school tuition costs and that schools may be more reluctant to enrol them. In these specific cases, shelters take advantage of the time gap between the release of the test results and the communication to the school to enrol the person as a minor, based on the age declared on arrival in Belgium.<sup>34</sup>

M.F.

We also sometimes have young people who are minors who are declared adults. But at that stage, as long as the information hasn't been changed in appendix 26, we try to juggle with it, so we leave. The appendix says that the person is a minor, so we take advantage of this before [test results is notified to school]

Interviewer

And so, what happens after notification?

M.F.

The person continues [the educational career], because they're already in the school system anyway. Yes, but now as an adult. It's like enrolling a youngster who's 16 and a half, 17, but who's still studying, even at 18, 18 and a half. So, it's a youngster who's already in the system. It's very complicated to take an adult and put him into the secondary school system. But as long as there's data to support the fact that the person is a minor, we can work with that.

The last coping mechanism developed by shelter workers that I would like to discuss concerns precisely all minors who turn 18 (or are declared adults) and who have not completed their educational careers. Red Cross shelters, in particular, have developed two coping strategies in favour of these young people:

Here, we work on the principle that, in our centre here, we really try to take advantage of this because we have former minors who become adults and who still stay with us. We also include these young people, in fact, who have come to declare themselves adults. As long as they continue their studies, we try to pay for them. Until they're 23 or 24 most of the time, in fact.

Moreover, once unaccompanied young people turn 18, they are supposed to be transferred to an adult shelter. This can seriously affect their schooling because: (a) the person may be transferred to a shelter too far away from the school, which drastically impacts the commute; (b) the person may lose all their social networks; (c) shelters for adults do not offer the same follow-up as the shelters for minors (i.e., wake-up calls, school contacts), which may lead to school dropout:

I had a pupil; I did a request so that he could stay [in the same shelter] until the end of his school year. FEDASIL, so the head office, not the shelter, the head office refused, saying that the centre had a

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<sup>34</sup> At least Red Cross ones. According to the information shared by M.F., FEDASIL shelters are reluctant to employ any kind of coping mechanism to favour adult schooling. When a minor is declared adult they will be reoriented toward adult vocational training. I've asked this question to two FEDASIL shelters, in one case the person didn't know the answer, in the second one I haven't got any answer at all.

specialised support project for 18- and 21-year-olds. So yes, on paper it's wonderful, but in practice it's nothing and so in fact I ended up with my young drop-out who was 18. [...] because he went from a place where there was a minimum living environment, at 10 p.m., everything is quiet to a [shelter for] adult where, in fact, there are no rules. And so my pupil ended up dropping out of school, the fact that they woke him up every morning with the group effect meant that the other minors went to school, well, it motivates him anyway.

(L.D. shelter worker and professional volunteer guardian, 28-05-2024)

In order to avoid these disadvantages, one of the shelters<sup>35</sup> put in place a specific coping mechanism which consisted in allowing the person to remain in that shelter until their educational career is completed.

So, and the specificity here too, we have this opportunity, [pupils] remains in our shelter even if they become adults. So, they're still going on, there's a transition, they're staying in our centre, and they're still going to school. So, there is also a follow-up that is being done, but less than the follow-up that was done when these people were...were minors. Here too, we sometimes have thirty to forty percent exchange that we keep a former minor boy in a single adult male place. So, we still have in adult lone men, if I'm not mistaken, we have nine adult lone men places. Of the nine places, we have six that are held by our former minor boys who were there. [...] it's an arrangement that we're trying to put in place and everything, since you know, the school... in fact, schooling, schools, is networking. It's just that a young person who went to school in Brussels has his whole network here. He has his teachers here, he has the other associations that work with him, he has his school friends. So sometimes placing the person and everything in a place a little far away, in fact, can have risks on the education of the person.

(Shelter worker)

#### **5.4. Network effect**

One of the goals of my research was also to analyse whether a network effect exists. Given the high concentration of schools and shelters, I initially anticipated that such a constellation would lead to the establishment of a Brussels network which would favour unaccompanied minors' educational careers and follow-up. However, the results of the fieldwork indicated that such a network effect does not exist, at least not in the form that I had initially expected. Indeed, as explained in the previous sections, actors tend to establish partnerships and engage in relational agencies, which led to the establishment of informal local and agent-centred networks.

There are plenty of groups out there, aren't there? So, there are meetings and consultations and things like that, but there isn't really a Brussels group. There's a working group on schooling and so on that's managed by more than one body. Park, which brings together the DASPA, Léon, cases, shelters, guardianship service, and so on. [...] But in reality, not much exists yet. I mean, there are lots of things in place, but really, in concrete terms, there are a few consultations. There's the platform in exile with the mermaids,

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<sup>35</sup> Further information regarding the shelter in question are confidential at the request of the interviewee.

but that's going to be more about raising issues or trying to find ways of working together. But there are 2 different school systems, 3 different reception systems. I mean, there are lots of them. There's federal, there's community, there's regional, it's, it's really complicated.

(M.F. shelter worker, 06-05-2024)

As explained by M.F., one of the biggest constraints impeding the establishment of a more structured network is the complexity of the Brussels case. The existence of different educational and reception systems, but also the presence of different institutional powers, leads to a highly heterogeneous context. As a result, each actor tends to create and rely on its own network based on personal resources and professional relationships.

There is no clear framework. There is a network between people of goodwill, trying to.... That's it. But it's a network that is— These are human beings who call each other, who send each other emails. That's all. It's really stupid. But we needed an impulse. . . . it went from the bottom up. But it went from human beings. It didn't go from a very particular setting. But there is a network now being created. There is a network. I could make you a diagram of the network, but there is a network. I know where to go. For example, in the art segment, he contacts me when he needs something. In technical education, vocational education. If I need, for example, accounting, if I need a sports section, there are networks that are created where we contact each other. They contact me, I contact them. There is a network that is created. So that is true. It was created. A spider web, if you will, that has been developing for three years and is growing.

(H.B. teacher and orientation counsellor, 21-04-2024)

Thus, rather than a proper network, it would be more appropriate to talk about an address book. Hence, all actors through time, experience and relationships develop their own address book, composed of useful contacts. To some extent, it would be possible to talk about coping mechanisms. Indeed, those address books are created by workers in order to facilitate their work and facilitate unaccompanied minors' educational career and future in Belgium. Through contacts and relations, each SLB is able to grant minors better service and resources. It is particularly interesting to notice that the creation of this network is, most of the time, based on need and it is highly sector-based. In other words, actors naturally engage in relational agency with other actors who might be helpful as it has been explained above.

## **6. Conclusion**

Since 2010, and especially after the so-called 2015 refugee crisis, the number of unaccompanied foreign minors arriving in Belgium has increased (Guardianship service, 2023). The exact number of UFM's is not known. Nevertheless, the number of active guardianships (3 638 in 2023) gives an indication. Due to their special status as foreigners and unaccompanied minors, a specific reception path aiming at the establishment of a "sustainable solution"- in other words, a life project enhancing minors' independence, has been developed for this population by the Belgium authorities. Education is a crucial element of this path. . Despite that, UFM's schooling faces many obstacles. Most of the research on migrant educational careers has taken a pupil-centred approach by analysing how pupils' individual characteristics influence

their educational careers and outcomes (Danhier & Martin, 2014; Delvaux, 2011; Jacobs, 2012; Jacobs et al, 2007, 2009; Jacobs & Rea, 2011). Few have explored the influence of the actors involved in the process (Van Houtte, 2004, Emery et al, 2022; Mendonça & Rigoni, 2020; Rigoni, 2023). Moreover, while a few studies have focused on UFM's educational career (Mendonça & Rigoni, 2020; Rigoni & Cenn, 2020, Rigoni, 2023), to my knowledge, no study has been conducted specifically on the Belgian case.

This thesis sought to fill the gap by addressing the question: *How do shelters, schools and guardians shape unaccompanied minors' educational careers?* It contributed to the literature on the topic both conceptually and empirically. Theoretically, this thesis sought to combine Bronfenbrenner's ecological model with the street-level bureaucracy theory. According to the socio-ecological framework, UFM's educational careers can be understood as the result of the interaction of different factors, including: (a) individual characteristics (language proficiency, prior studies, social capital); (b) the micro-system encompassing the relations between the individual and his/her immediate environment; (c) the meso-system, defining the relations among micro-systems; (d) the exo-system, including all social structures, such as institutions, which indirectly influence minors' educational careers and; (e) the macro-system, defined as the set of values and norms regulating the society. In particular, it has been posited that micro- and meso-system relations could be better understood through the lens of street-level bureaucracy. In other words, it is assumed that the identified actors, due to their positionality and discretionary power, act as street-level bureaucrats, developing coping mechanisms which shape unaccompanied minors' educational careers.

Empirically this thesis is based on fresh data collected through qualitative research. I conducted (27) semi-structured interviews with school personnel, shelter workers and guardians in Brussels.

The results of this thesis confirm the initial expectation that all three actors' agency shape unaccompanied minors' educational careers. However, this is done in different manners and the data shows that there is a hierarchy of influence: the school personnel have the biggest influence over UFM's schooling, while guardians exert relatively little influence.

Guardians, despite being legally responsible for UFM's education, have ultimately little impact on the process. The reasons are manifold. First of all, due to a lack of guardians, there is a delay of three to six months before guardians are appointed. In the meantime, other actors (notably shelters) begin the school enrolment procedures. Moreover, despite some exceptions, according to shelters workers and school personnel, guardians seem to neglect pupils' education, focusing on other aspects of pupils' life, especially the administrative procedures. In this regard, the example of employed guardians is rather self-explanatory. Indeed, due to excessive workload, they tend to develop "away from the client" coping mechanisms, mainly by delegating their power of attorney to other actors, such as shelters and/or host families. Lastly, unlike the other actors taken into account in this study, guardians are not service providers properly speaking. Indeed, although they act as gatekeepers of minors' rights (e.g., minors

cannot start an asylum procedure without a guardian), they are not directly involved in any process of service providing (such as education or housing in the case of shelters). Despite all those factors limiting guardians' influence, their agency still impacts UFM, in particular, pupils' school choice.

Similarly to guardians, shelters also influence UFM's school orientation. In particular, the school choice appears to be based not only on pupils' preferences but also on the shelter's network. Indeed, shelters, due to their geographically fixed location and relative stability over time, tend to engage in partnerships with the school personnel, leading to relational agency. The relations established between shelters and schools can simplify workers' tasks, by developing shortcuts and specific collaboration mechanisms, but also by facilitating UFM's educational careers. Shelter workers orient pupils toward schools with whom they have established prior relations, that is, schools which are aware of pupils' specific needs and are more likely to develop coping mechanisms favouring UFM's educational careers. Moreover, pupils with lower (or no) chances of obtaining international protection status, are oriented toward vocational training in order to allow them to access regularisation through the 9bis procedure.

As for the last actor considered in this study, my findings show that schoolteachers and educators also use their autonomy and power to develop coping mechanisms in favour of the pupils. In particular, French-speaking schools employ coping mechanisms in order to fill institutional gaps regarding (a) pupils' language mastering, by allowing them to unofficially take extra DASPA classes and granting extra-support to foreign students who join ordinary classes and (b) by developing instrumental actions in order to facilitate pupils' orientation post-reception classes.

Regarding the orientation which occurs post-reception classes, apart from specific cases (such as Cardinal Mercier), other schools have developed specific coping mechanisms, nevertheless, the influence of the latter seems limited. Generally, due to the educational gap (linked to pupils' poor prior educational career) and language difficulties, UFM are generally oriented toward professional or vocational training.

Lastly, this study aimed to evaluate the existence of a pan-Brussels network and its possible effects on UFM. No evidence of such a network has been found. Nevertheless, some actors confirmed the existence of informal and local networks. Actors seem to engage mostly in partnership with meaningful agents and in different forms of relational agency. Future research may explore these networks, evaluating the reasons at their base and their impact on UFM educational career.

This thesis is not exempt from limitations and biases. The analysis is based on a relatively limited sample, especially in the case of guardians (8 interviewees). Moreover, due to limited time, UFM themselves have not been included in the sample. Further studies could extend the number of actors within each group to develop a more in-depth understanding of their roles, perception and coping mechanisms. Other actors' agency should be analysed, by taking into account the agency of CSOs and host families, whose agency has not been analysed in this thesis. Expanding the geographical scope of

the analysis in two ways would also be interesting: within Belgium to explore more in-depth territorial differences between Flemish-French speaking regions but also outside of Belgium, to compare the role of actors across countries. This thesis only focuses on a snapshot of the current situation in Belgium. Moreover, further investigation could provide a longitudinal analysis of how the roles of these actors have evolved over time (within Belgium and across countries) but also all along UFM's educational careers. In this respect, the focus of this research has been limited to the early stage of UFM's schooling, further research could explore later stages of minors' educational careers.

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## Annex 1: list of interviews

Interviewee	Role	Date	Language in which the interview has been conducted
OKAN class educator*	OKAN class educator	03-06-2024	English
A.O.	OKAN coordinator	18-04-2024	English
H.B.	Teacher and Orientation councillor	21-05-2024	French
T.V.	DASPA teacher	15-05-2024	French
C.B.	Daspa teacher & orientation councillor	14-05-2024	French
A.A.	DASPA educator	15-05-2024	French
M.A.	DASPA coordinator & orientation councillor	22-04-2024	French
Ernest Richard#	DASPA personnel	22-04-2024	French
S.B.	DASPA teacher	23-04-2024	French
S.R.	DASPA teacher	23-05-2024	French
C.C.	DASPA coordinator	16-04-2024	French
M.A.V. & V.V.B	DASPA coordinator & Daspa teacher	11-04-2024	French
B.F. & P.D.T.	Orientation coucillors	14-05-2024	French
H.N.	Retired volunteer guardian	13-05-2024	French
B.V.	Retired volunteer guardian	9-05-2024	French
N.A.	Professional volunteer guardian	30-05-2024	French
L.D.	Professional volunteer guardian	28-05-2024	French
M.R.	Professional volunteer guardian	24-06-2024	French
E.C.	Employed guardian	07-05-2024	French
K.K. & L.C	Employed guardians	16-05-2024	French
Employed guardian*	Employed guardian	13-05-2024	French
E.C.	Employed guardian	07-05-2024	French
K.D.	Shelter worker	13-05-2024	French

M.S.	Shelter worker	11-05-2024	French
K.P.	Shelter worker	17-03-2024	French
N.B.	Shelter worker	07-04-2024	French
M.F.	Shelter worker	06-05-2024	French

\* The interviewee asked to remain anonymous

# I interviewed the the whole DASPA class personnel