

Unaccompanied minors, different realities and support methods

According to the Debré report of May 2010, the arrival of young foreign minors in France and in Europe has been increasing at a steady pace since the beginning of the 2000s. In legal terms, the administrative category of “unaccompanied minors” means that these young people are unaccompanied by a legal custodian, with neither the assistance nor the support of their parents. They therefore fall under the child welfare and protection services. Their vulnerability is recognised by the fact that they are “unaccompanied”.

However, the young foreigner does not only fall under the legal framework of child welfare and protection but also under the legal framework that governs the entry and stay of foreigners in France and the evolving provisions of migration policies. Moreover, the status of “unaccompanied minor” which allows access to child protection devices often overlaps with others that are less administrative, more political and more covered by the media such as the “undocumented”, “migrants”, “young persons in an irregular situation” or “having applied for regularisation”. Unaccompanied minors are therefore supported not only in terms of their legal situation related to their vulnerability but also in terms of their status as migrants. In the medium term, they depend on the migration policy and in the short term, on child welfare and protection.

The county councils are the administrative bodies that manage child protection services. These social welfare services for children provide for the accommodation and socio-educational support of these young people under protection, since they are migrants recognised as minors. Most of the time, they are welcomed in the framework of specific devices where the human resources devoted to their accompaniment differ from those allocated to other young people under child protection as they are considered as “more autonomous”. The latest report of the National Observatory of Social Action (*Observatoire national de l'action social* – ODAS) of January 2018 shows that the cost of the place of an unaccompanied minor is between 40 to 50% less than that of other young people under child protection.

It should be noted that it is generally the faulty family environment that justifies the decision to place teenagers under protection, or accompany them within the family or place them in an institution. This decision is accompanied by the assumption of a variety of material situations according to the place given to the parents and the maintenance of the family link, which can evolve over time. For these young people entrusted to child protection services, the socio-educational support is provided in the framework of parental substitution and integrates all areas related to education.

For young foreign minors, it is the absence of a legal custodian that activates protection. Therefore, the accompaniment of an “unaccompanied minor” cannot refer to this model of family intervention. The psycho-technical tools that are traditionally implemented within child welfare and protection services are often not quite adapted for these young people (they do not take account of their migratory experience).

However, this category of unaccompanied minors is primarily administrative and legal and does not refer to the existence of a homogenous group that is “more autonomous” than the other young people entrusted to child protection services. Other approaches have tried to better comprehend this category. The best known one that is regularly cited in reports and studies on the issue of foreign minors is that of Angéline Etiemble (*Les Mineurs isolés étrangers en France. Évaluation quantitative de la population accueillie à l'aide sociale à l'enfance*, 2002).

The sociologist proposes a typology that takes account of the migratory dynamics by pointing out the causes of departure. The study distinguishes five profiles: exiled young people fleeing war-affected areas; the mandated ones, “holders of a parental project” whose objective is to succeed in order to help their family that remained in the country of origin; the exploited that are trapped in networks of traffickers and forced into clandestine labour, even prostitution; runaways who have left the family home due to parental conflict or abuse and who join a relative near or far in the host country; wanderers who were already street children in the country of origin.

This typology allows to perceive migration as a social and family reality and to integrate the migratory route in the elaboration of concrete methods of accompaniment. It also allows social workers to shed light on the migration experience but also on the capacity and limits of child protection to take care of them and ensure adequate support. Indeed, working with young foreigners also means getting sometimes caught, in spite of oneself, in emotional reactions. It also means taking position in a political debate on immigration, and in controversies over identity. Yet, the social worker cannot forget the reality of the situation of the person in front of him or the contingencies of an environment that can be levers or barriers to his/her integration.

If unaccompanied minors are the subject of general debates, the action of the social worker must be concrete and empirical keeping in mind the fragility of the latter. Being in relation with persons who have migrated, with their situation on the one hand (that of emigrant-immigrant) and their needs (insertion and integration) on the other hand, is also to accept that this relationship is not a “structured” one, that is, totally mastered by the social workers but it can be uncertain and variable.

Social workers must reconcile an experience they know well with another that is more uncertain: they must both carry out their educational mission consisting of practices of accompaniment which is at the heart of their job, and play the role of actors of social inclusion, thus integrating the struggle against discrimination into the framework of their actions. In other words, they are the ones who participate in the development of strategies to remove or circumvent obstacles to the inclusion of unaccompanied minors.

The accompaniment of unaccompanied minors is characterised by several aspects. The first aspect is related to educational work based on the concrete needs of the young people hosted: help with administrative procedures (particularly requests for regularisation), medical follow-up, schooling or training. Training will create an enabling environment for the trainee to integrate the business environment and promote the possible obtaining of an employment contract.

The second aspect is related to the preparation of young people for when they leave the child protection services. When they reach the age of majority, young migrants automatically fall under the migration policy. Their new status brings with it issues of access to rights and integration: problems related to housing, healthcare, especially in case of serious pathologies, others related to their administrative situations, discrimination in access to jobs, employment that is little or not related at all to their studies, etc.

From this perspective, while being “autonomous” in managing their daily lives and their ability to ensure their personal project, young unaccompanied minors remain socially very dependent on legal and administrative rules that allow them or not to further their integration.

Guillaume Logez and Jean-Michel Beraud

Directors of establishments devoted to child protection managed by the
Association laïque pour l'éducation, la formation, la prévention, l'autonomie (ALEFPA)
(www.alefpa.asso.fr/)