



The Integration Experiences of Unaccompanied Refugee Minors.

What difficulties and opportunities do unaccompanied minors with different legal statuses identify in relation to their integration process?

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Bachelor's Thesis

GPS, Malmö University

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14.Dec.2024

Word count: 13120

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ABSTRACT:

This study places in context the dire situation of unaccompanied refugee minors and their adversary experience while traveling and upon arrival. Minors have made hazardous journeys across borders to escape persecution, violence, or other serious harm in their country of origin. In such migration, traumatic events typical of displacement are usually filled with violence, injuries, psychological trauma, and loss of family or friends. Upon arrival, many are immediately confronted by numerous problems associated with basic things, including food, shelter, and protection from abuses, exploitation, or trafficking. This situation has been made worse by barriers in the form of legislations and bureaucracies instituted while seeking asylum or other forms of protection. Yet, unaccompanied minor refugees demonstrate remarkable resiliency and unwavering aspirations to improve life prospects. This cannot happen unless they are first integrated into the Swedish society, both in terms of language, and also opportunities to secure jobs. This perception of their sufferings while minors is quite fundamental to devising a multi-dimensional support system to cater to their needs and give them a new start in life in a secure, care-enhancing environment.

Keywords: Unaccompanied, Minor, Sweden, Refugees, Migrants, integration, experiences.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Information and Context

Unaccompanied refugee minors go through many different unfortunate situations and experiences. They have traversed a long distance to find safety due to the persecution, violence, or any other hazardous conditions in their country. During this, in the process, while passing, they might experience physical or psychological trauma and the loss of family members or any dear ones. Upon arrival, they often cannot meet their basic needs for food, shelter, and other essentials and are vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, or trafficking. They also usually face legal and administrative challenges in seeking asylum or another form of protection. It also faces challenges despite all good intentions, and the determined and persistent will of many unaccompanied minor refugees to make something better out of their life requires their integration into Sweden-to learn the language and to be able to work.

According to Widman (2022), the Swedish migration reform of 2015 shifted from permanent residence permits for asylum seekers needing international protection to three-year residence permits and 13-month residence permits for individuals granted subsidiary protection. The law also temporarily abolished the protection category for persons otherwise needing protection. Furthermore, the law restricted the right to family reunification for refugees with temporary residence permits, abolished the right to family reunification for individuals with subsidiary protection status, and sharpened the requirements of accommodation and resources for maintenance for family reunification migration (ibid, p. 18). Finally, the possibility of receiving a residence permit on humanitarian grounds was severely restricted (ibid, p. 18). The application of the provisions in the law depended on three factors: (i) the registration date of the asylum application, (ii) the date of the asylum decision, and (iii) the age of the individual or their family members at the time of the asylum decision (ibid, p. 18). The shift from permanent to temporary residence permits applied retroactively for all adults whose asylum case was decided after the law took effect unless they belonged to the family of a child (who was under the age of 18 at the date of the asylum decision) whose application for asylum was registered on or before November 24, 2015 (ibid, p. 36).

Children were exempt from the shift to temporary residence permits if they applied on or before November 24, 2015, and were under 18 at the time of the asylum decision (ibid, p. 36). The restrictions on family reunification, in turn, applied only to those granted

temporary residence permits, with the right to family reunification abolished for individuals with subsidiary protection status and temporary residence permits whose asylum application was registered after November 24, 2015 (ibid, p. 36). The sharpened maintenance requirements for family reunions only applied if the asylum application was registered after the law took effect (ibid, p. 36). Finally, the restrictions on the possibility of receiving a residence permit on humanitarian grounds and the abolition of the other protection needs status followed the same rules as the shift from permanent to temporary residence permits (ibid, p. 18).

Lind et al. (2023) highlight the temporary residence permits that limit the life opportunities for young refugees in Sweden and hinder their ability to achieve the required educational level. As a result of a significant shift in Swedish immigration policy, several temporary changes were introduced in the Swedish Aliens Act 2016, most of which became permanent in 2021, to restrict the rights of asylum seekers and refugees (ibid, p. 2). After the elections in 2022, three right-wing parties formed a government with the support of the far-right Anti-immigrant party Sweden Democrats, which can be understood as the complete end of the paradigm shift in Swedish immigration policies that began during the Swedish Social Democratic Party (SPD-led) government and provincial law in 2016, as this agreement signals widespread changes in most areas of immigration-related legislation, to build one of the most restrictive immigration legislations in Europe (ibid, p. 4). This agreement indicates that, for example, permanent residence permits for refugees should be revoked entirely. People can also be deported because they have an unacceptable lifestyle of not achieving the basic requirements such as learning the language or obtaining work (ibid, p.11). In addition, some aspects of the agreement have been interpreted as indicating that permanent residence permits can be downgraded to temporary licenses.

During this study, I needed more answers and explanations as to how these unaccompanied minor migrants are integrating and the background picture as to what led them to migrate. This led to my research exploring the difficulties and opportunities these minors faced, their legal statuses, how this affected them, and their challenges in the integration process.

1.2 Problem Statement

Integration is a multidimensional legal, social, economic, and psychosocial process. In the case of unaccompanied minors, the legal status provides the grounds for integration into

society and, therefore, affects their housing, education, healthcare, and employability. The shift from permanent to temporary residence permits in Sweden, alongside increasingly restrictive immigration policies, has significantly hampered these minors. Temporary permits often limit access to critical resources, reconstitute instability, and prevent people from long-term planning. The case is that the status of minors with temporary permits provides limitations in family reunification- the most critical factor of emotion and social being- and thus involves more significant risks of removal whenever stringent renewal requirements are at risk.

Besides, the political situation in Sweden has changed and brought new challenges. In fact, since the 2022 elections, the increase of such a right-wing coalition tightened this even further with its support of anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats. Proposals are made toward scraping off permanent residence permits and setting stricter demands on holders of temporary permits, which is a deeper trend toward exclusionary behaviour. Such a situation affects unaccompanied minors above all, who hardly know how to help themselves amidst such complexities. This is leading to many minors living in limbo, neither being able to integrate themselves into Swedish society nor plan for their futures.

The experiences of unaccompanied minors point to broader issues within the system in Sweden related to immigration and integration. While the country has structured different support programs, such as housing in HVB homes or language training, many do not offer precisely what minors may need. Instead, they face other particular challenges: cultural and linguistic barriers limiting the depth of contacts they can build with the community they come into and poorly supported psychological trauma fostered since migration started in most cases. Fully addressing these gaps in service delivery requires a complex understanding of how legal status intersects with other integration components, including the social, economic, and psychological aspects.

1.3 Research question:

What difficulties and opportunities do unaccompanied minors with different legal statuses identify about their integration process?

The research question highlights the central role of legal status in shaping integration experiences. It seeks to uncover the challenges faced by unaccompanied minors and the opportunities that enable them to succeed. By addressing this question, the study aims to provide actionable insights that inform policy and practice.

1.4 Purpose of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to explore the integration experiences of unaccompanied minors in Sweden, with a particular focus on the role of legal status. By mapping the challenges and opportunities linked to various legal statuses, this research provides insight into the systemic barriers and facilitators that mould the integration process. Grasping these dynamics is critical to developing policies and practices that address the unique needs of unaccompanied minors and promote their successful integration into Swedish society.

Besides feeding into the current debate at the academic level on migration and integration issues, this research study is designed to inform policy and practice. This is not only a piece of research for policy; it will hopefully be read by social workers, educators, and community organisations involved in the care and integration process for unaccompanied minors. By centering their lived experiences, this research signals a move toward a holistic approach in the integration process of these children in a legal, social, and psychological way.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This, of course, is influenced by legal, social, cultural, and economic factors. These minors belong to a vulnerable group and face unique challenges in legally navigating, linguistically and culturally overcoming barriers, and socially making connections with people in unknown environments. Prior work has documented essential features of their incorporation process, but significant knowledge gaps persist, particularly concerning the relationship between legal status and integration outcomes. This literature review will explore these dimensions through the lens of the theoretical framework proposed by Spencer and Charsley (2021), which identifies four key areas that are essential to integration:

- ❖ **Foundation:** Legal status and rights are the base from which integration can take place. In their absence, access to opportunities and resources remains restricted. This view has been supported by Lind et al. (2023).
- ❖ **Facilitators** include the following: Language acquisition facilitates better acquaintance with the new environment and is conducive to resilience, while knowledge about culture and Stability in the living conditions do the same (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019).
- ❖ **Social Network:** The relationship or networks that exist between a peer, mentor, or even the community are essential to feeling belonging and inclusiveness (Herz & Lalander, 2021)
- ❖ **Means and markers:** Access to education, employment, housing, and healthcare reflect practical results of successful integration. The current study has, therefore, organised the review along these dimensions and connects the theoretical insights with empirical evidence to offer a multi-faceted description of the experiences of unaccompanied minors. Emerging from these themes are elements that have been critically examined to understand how each helps shape integration trajectories and identify gaps.

2. 2 Legal Status and Rights (Foundation)

Legal status is regarded as the cornerstone of integration, as it affects the availability of resources and opportunities for unaccompanied minors, impacting their well-being. Spencer and Charsley use the term "foundation" in their theoretical framework to mean that rights and citizenship are essential in enabling individuals to engage fully in host societies. The residence permit that unaccompanied minors receive, temporary or permanent, has considerable implications for their integration trajectory.

2.2.1 Integration of Important Legal Status

The right to legal status brings a feeling of security and Stability, giving the unaccompanied minors a chance to plan their futures and be more participatory. Permanent residence permits are avenues leading to long-term possibilities in integration, facilitating opportunities for education, employment, health, and family reunification. Still, temporary residence permits have to be renewed regularly, are often granted with solid limitations, and thus tend to produce uncertainty and reduce the chances of finding an opportunity to be integrated into society. Widman shows that temporary residence permits undermine socio-economic incorporation by restricting access to stable employment and housing, creating instability and dependency cycles.

The study by Lind et al. (2023) says that young refugees are disproportionate victims of legal uncertainty, sometimes in their development when interventions are particularly effective. For instance, temporary permit-holding minors often cannot be admitted into higher education because the eligibility restrictions exclude them or offer no financial support for people with a non-permanent resident permit. It affects not only school outcomes but also skills that will become useful later when seeking jobs, making these people further marginal in society.

2.2.2 Barriers from Temporary Residence Permits

In this line of argument, temporary residence permits create a lot of insecurity and exclusion for unaccompanied minors. According to Widman (2022), temporary permits increase levels of stress and anxiety among the bearers since their presence is always questioned. Such an environment might not encourage the child to invest in his personal and professional development as he feels that his efforts might be meaningless once deported.

Such lack of legal certainty affects and creates disruptions along other dimensions of integration. In this respect, Lind et al. (2023) noted that temporary permits often do not allow for a minor's access to many programs and services that should be allowed to permanent residents: vocational training and a good number of job placement programs, among others. With it now comes systemic inequality and stereotypes surrounding the kind of burden that refugees could place on them instead of contributing to them. First, while being the most specific exclusion, it reduces their opportunities and contributes to their alienation and loneliness for themselves being unaccompanied minors.

2.2.3 The Role of Family Reunification

Another essential aspect touching on legal status is family reunification. According to Widman (2022), the migration reform in Sweden in 2015 imposed strict limitations on family reunification for temporary permits. Such a policy removes one of the most significant sources of emotional and social support for unaccompanied minors and further hampers their integration process. The absence of the family usually leads to increased dependence on institutional care and may not provide the much-needed attention to the child's psychological and social requirements.

2.2.4 Impact on Education and Well-being

Unstable legal conditions directly affect the education and social welfare of unaccompanied minors. As Lind et al. explain, temporary permits prevent one from getting educational opportunities primarily because of not being allowed to apply for scholarships or financial aid. This denial brings further obstacles to continuing with college-level education, thus making dependency and poverty cyclical. Furthermore, there is a constant threat of deportation associated with poor mental health, depression, and an energetic feeling that has been blunted. Widman (2022) states that legal status is another dimension where a sense of belonging among unaccompanied minors manifests. Those with permanent permits were likelier to feel accepted and integrated within their respective communities than those with temporary permits. That would underline how legal Stability might create a sense of belonging and inclusion that is significant for good integration.

2.3 Language, Culture, Safety, and Stability (Facilitators)

These facilitating factors for language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and stable living conditions are critical in enabling unaccompanied minors to integrate into host

societies. Per Spencer and Charsley's theoretical framework of 2021, Precursors from these precursors enable connectivity and meaningful participation in social, economic, and educational systems.

2.3.1 Integration and Language Acquisition

One of the most striking facilitators of integration is language acquisition. Knowledge of the host country's language enables unaccompanied minors to access services, engage in education, and interact with their peers and community members. As Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö (2019) comment, language skills are a requisite for finding work and progressing through school. Opportunities are hard to access without such skills, often leading to minors struggling to be self-sufficient.

As pointed out in the research by Hosseini and Punzi concerning Afghan unaccompanied girls, learning a new language requires immense effort for children at a time when they may face many problems, including trauma and cultural adjustments. In this context, many participants discussed how isolating their early period of residence was because of significant initial barriers to communication. These same young people found greater confidence opened up more choices in their futures when support through the Swedish for Immigrants course facilitated access.

2.3.2 Cultural Challenges and Chances for Adaptation

Cultural differences add another dimension to their integration process as unaccompanied minors. These challenges include adjusting to social norms, understanding local customs, and navigating unfamiliar institutional systems. Hosseini and Punzi (2022) identified the struggle of Afghan girls to balance native cultural values with Swedish societal expectations. Most girls would like to keep their traditional culture and be part of Sweden's culture, such as gender equality and individual autonomy at their discretion.

Cultural exchange opportunities provide a means for mutual understanding to be advanced between unaccompanied minors and the host community. Participation in cultural programs, schools, or community organisations opens interaction spaces where they can share their views and learn about Swedish traditions. Such interactions will go a long way in integrating them and breaking stereotypes for inclusivity.

2.3.3 Importance of Safety and Housing to Provide Stability

Stable housing with a perceived sense of safety provides a fundamental foundation from which unaccompanied minors may begin the work of integration. According to Lundberg and Dahlquist (2012), in a residential care setting, for instance, HVB homes or residential care facilities for minors are a place of safety where unaccompanied minors may be supported with resources and advice. The study underscores that stable housing reduces stress and allows minors to focus on education and personal development. However, safety concerns remain, especially for those living in overcrowded or under-resourced facilities. Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö (2019a) mention that poor housing conditions increase feelings of instability and make the integration process more difficult. A safe place to live, together with counselling and legal support, greatly empowers minors to deal with the challenges of integration.

2.3.4 Conclusion

The facilitators integral in the integration process will include language acquisition, cultural adaptation, safety, and stable housing. Language skills and cultural knowledge open doors to education and further employment, while a secure and nurturing place to reside offers Stability where a person can grow. The findings by Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö 2019 and Hosseini and Punzi 2022 show that investment in these facilitators will help unaccompanied minors to surmount these barriers and thrive in the host societies.

2.4 Social Bonds, Bridges, and Links (Social Connections)

Social connections are indispensable to the integration of unaccompanied minors. These include peer relationships and mentor and community relationships that lower feelings of isolation and give emotional support and a sense of belonging. The framework by Spencer and Charsley identifies three ways social connections may operate: through bonds, bridges, and connections within a cultural or familial group, between different cultural groups, and to institutions and organisations.

2.4.1 The Role of Social Networks in Facilitating Inclusion

Social networks have an essential role in the process of alleviating loneliness and isolation for unaccompanied minors. According to Herz and Lalander (2021), supportive relationships by mentors, social workers, or peers significantly affect the well-being of

UAMs in Sweden. In contrast, social workers who are ready to listen and, therefore, develop relationships based on an ethic of trust can help such minors along their integration path without administrative complications. Peer networks also play a role in developing inclusion and intercultural exchange. Wimelius et al. (2017) underline that creating opportunities for unaccompanied minors to establish relationships with Swedish peers is essential. Schools and extracurricular activities are crucial for such contacts, allowing minors to improve their language, learn about Swedish culture, and acquire social capital.

2.4.2 Challenges with Building Connections

In the wake of the benefits of social networks, solitary minors face severe challenges in making friends with their Swedish peers and communities. Ekström et al. (2021) explain how racial discrimination and xenophobia create a barrier to the establishment of meaningful relationships. Many minors relate to feelings of exclusion or stereotypes, which further reinforce social divides and perpetuate isolation. Herz and Lalander (2021) further observe that systemic barriers in the form of a lack of culturally inclusive programming or the physical segregation of immigrant communities contribute to limited opportunities for social integration. These challenges underline the need for targeted initiatives that will encourage cross-cultural interaction and mutual understanding between unaccompanied minors and the host communities.

2.4.3 Coping with Exclusion and Building Resilience

Against this relative social exclusion, many unaccompanied minors have worked out resilience strategies concerning the general society. Ekström et al. (2021) go through how some of the minors fight back in a silent nature against the conditions of racketeering on racial bullying and discrimination; silence protects young people, or it gets them not even to self-elocution. Wimelius et al. (2017) believe that structured programs- for instance, mentorship schemes or community-based initiatives- are bound to break barriers down. Such programs open safe avenues for dialogue and interaction whereby unaccompanied minors feel excluded and have the opportunity to connect themselves with the broader community.

2.4.4 Conclusion

Social bonds, bridges, and links are essential to enhance inclusion and reduce feelings of loneliness among unaccompanied minors. Supportive relationships from mentors and peers can be a transformative agent in their integration journey. At the same time, systemic barriers related to discrimination must be surmounted so that social networks become equitably

accessed. These contributions from Herz and Lalander (2021), Wimelius et al. (2017), and Ekström et al. (2021) have gone on to prove that much remains to be done in giving priority to social connections at the core of integration.

2.5 Access to Education, Employment, and Housing (Markers and Means)

Markers of successful integration include access to education, employment, and housing. Such resources reflect the extent to which unaccompanied minors have integrated and shaped their ability to contribute to their host society. Therefore, Spencer and Charsley's theoretical framework emphasises that markers and means are not just an aspect of integration but essential to providing tangible indicators of inclusion and self-sufficiency.

2.5.1 How Access Reflects Successful Integration

Education is a fundamental pathway of integration, thus providing the minors with competencies and opportunities for employment and social involvement. Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö (2019) report that the highest educational attainment rates significantly affect long-term integration. Those minors who receive adequate protection to finish their education are, in turn, more likely to find permanent employment and economic freedom, conditions that give even more reason for feeling part of where they have moved to than dependence upon welfare. Probably the most significant factor in whether integration is taking place or not seems to be employment. Related to financial security and self-reliance, it opens up doors to social life and cultural exchange. The ability to participate in the labour market reflects one aspect of integration into the economic systems of the host society.

However, Lundberg 2020 provides that unaccompanied minors usually do not have much better chances for a meaningful job, for example, due to deficiencies in language, work experience, and the lack of opportunities for training. Stable housing, as in the case of integration, is an opportunity for a safe life while paying more attention to education and personal development. Housing stability correlates with mental well-being by reducing stress and anxieties about uncertain living situations.

2.5.2 Barriers to Access

Despite these markers, unaccompanied minors encounter severe systemic obstacles regarding access to education, labour, and housing. There is discrimination in the labour market towards people from immigrant backgrounds, as recorded by Rydgren in 2004. An

unaccompanied minor could be especially vulnerable since hiring employers might view them as unfit for work or, being temporary residents, not worth engaging for long-term workforce productivity. Such struggles are further compounded by legal restrictions: many unaccompanied minors living with temporary residence permits have been excluded from programs facilitating their integration, such as financial aid for education and public housing. According to Lundberg, the absence of policies addressing these structural barriers promotes exclusion and perpetuates dependencies.

2.5.3 Conclusion

Successful integration for unaccompanied minors has been manifested in access to education, employment, and housing. These markers show their inclusion into various structures of society and their contribution to the host communities. However, systemic discrimination and binding legislation have continued to limit such access and point to the need for policies that tackle such barriers and foster equal opportunity.

2.6 Discrimination, Cultural Identity, and Belonging (Cross-Cutting Themes)

The interlinking issues of discrimination, cultural identity, and a sense of belonging cut across all the stages of integration. Exclusionary experiences, challenges in maintaining cultural identity, and difficulty in establishing a sense of belonging firmly affect the psychological and social well-being of unaccompanied minors.

2.6.1 Experiences of Discrimination

Unaccompanied minors are commonly discriminated against in school, work, and social life. Racial harassment and xenophobia have substantial effects on the mental health of minors, states Ekström et al. (2021), consequently making the children feel lonely and not confident about themselves. A lot of them reported that they had not been included in their peer groups or that teachers and employers treated them differently because of immigration status or background. In this line, Rydgren describes that the labour market also discriminates, making unaccompanied minors further marginalised. Employers often stereotype such people as less able or unwilling to integrate, thus excluding them from stable and meaningful employment opportunities. This systemic bias creates an invidious circle where exclusion begets more exclusion.

2.6.2 Preserving Cultural Identity in the Process of Integration

Maintenance of cultural identity is essential psychologically and as a sense of continuity for unaccompanied minors. According to Söderqvist, balancing transnational identities means that the minors often feel a longing to be part of the host society in addition to keeping ties with their home culture. Such a duality of identity breeds tension but, at the same time, creates an opportunity for cross-cultural understanding and self-development.

For instance, participation in cultural events or religious exercises allows the minor to stay in contact with his/her culture, which provides comfort and a continuum. Similarly, the opportunity for the minor to get familiar with Swedish culture facilitated by school arrangements or other activities within civil society creates understanding and serves integration.

2.6.3 Introduction-Belonging and Mental Well-being

Belonging is one of the essential features of inclusion. According to Ekström et al. (2021), it is precisely a lack of belonging-along with other things, bears responsibility for raising feelings of alienation and poor mental health among unaccompanied minors. On one side, an environment of inclusiveness and respect for diversity culminates into an atmosphere of belonging, thus enabling the minor to participate more within the host society.

2.6.4 Conclusion

The most salient issues in the integration of unaccompanied minors include combating discrimination, preserving cultural identity, and nurturing a sense of belonging. According to Ekström et al. (2021) and Söderqvist (2014), such findings point to creating an inclusive environment that values and celebrates diversity rather than fighting the systemic barriers that contribute to exclusion.

3.0 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

3.1 Introduction to the Theoretical Framework

Integration of unaccompanied minors is a multidimensional process that depends on legal, social, cultural, and economic factors. This research considers the integration model presented by Spencer and Charsley in 2021. The latter provides four critical dimensions of integration: Foundation, Facilitators, Social Connections, and Markers and Means. This framework is critical because it emphasises an interrelation between these dimensions, making it a comprehensive lens through which the challenges and opportunities for unaccompanied minors can be analysed. This framework is applied to explore the research question: *What difficulties and opportunities do unaccompanied minors with different legal statuses identify about their integration process?* By structuring the analysis around these dimensions, the study ensures a systematic approach to understanding the lived experiences of unaccompanied minors and how legal status influences their integration trajectory.

3.2 Key Dimensions of the Framework

3.2.1 Foundation: Rights and Citizenship

Legal status is the building block of integration, meaning it implies rights, resource accessibility, and a belonging platform. Through such status, unaccompanied minors will have a future goal of social participation in host countries when there is legal Stability. According to Widman, temporary residence permits facilitate enormous barriers, such as instigated insecurity and restrictions towards limited essential resources, including education and jobs. On the other hand, permanent residence permits give the path to Stability or even citizenship.

In the case of unaccompanied minors, legal ambiguity has a significant impact on raising psychological distress, as indicated by Lind et al. (2023), who documented that uncertainty over temporary permits has adverse effects on attainment and well-being. Most other dimensions of integration are severely limited social connections or access to work without stable legal grounding.

3.2.2 Facilitators: Language, Culture, Safety and Stability

A facilitator is an integrator who accommodates unaccompanied minors to identify and negotiate their place within a new environment. Language is instrumental at all levels: it

opens doors to education, professional experiences, and social exchange (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019a). For example, minors who have attended special language programs for immigrants, SFI, become much better prepared for the integration challenges and become less isolated in host communities.

The other significant facilitators are the cultural adaptations. The development of an understanding of the norms and values of the host culture while retaining the individual's cultural identity leads to a sense of belonging, according to Hosseini and Punzi (2022). However, these unaccompanied minors, especially, find it very challenging to balance these differences when these cultures go against their set societal expectations. Safety and Stability are other essential facilitators. According to Lundberg and Dahlquist (2012), a safe home, as provided by the HVB homes, creates an environment of security where minors can direct their energy toward integration work. Insecure housing situations generally create stress and interfere with the possibility of education and work.

3.2.3 Social Connections: Bonds, Bridges, and Links

Social connections are essential in fostering inclusion and reducing isolation. Spencer and Charsley (2021) identify three types of social connections:

- ❖ Bonds: the relationships in one's cultural or ethnic group.
- ❖ Bridges: Relations between cultural groups.
- ❖ Links: Ties to institutions and organisations.

Herz and Lalander (2021) underline that social workers are essential for unaccompanied minors to establish trust and create a feeling of solidarity. Such relationships can provide shortcuts through bureaucratic systems and tear down barriers to their integration. According to Wimelius et al. (2017), peer networks provide emotional support and a means of cultural exchange.

However, building bridges among Swedish peers and communities is considered challenging to achieve due to either language barriers or societal discrimination. Such social exclusion creates limitations to opportunities for integration and may contribute to persistent feelings of otherness among unaccompanied minors.

3.2.4 Markers and Means: Employment, Housing, Education, and Health

Means and markers are tangible indicators of the success of integration. Access to education provides skills for employment and social participation among unaccompanied

minors. However, systemic barriers, such as a lack of proper school support, create obstacles to educational attainment, according to Lundberg 2020.

Employment is also an essential indicator as it ensures financial independence and direction. However, Rydgren (2004) mentions that discrimination in the labour market results in immigrants and unaccompanied minors encountering many challenges when seeking permanent jobs. Housing and healthcare also play a significant role. Stable housing allows minors to concentrate on their development and integration, and access to healthcare ensures that all physical and mental health needs are met, thus integral to overall well-being and integration.

3.3 Application of the Framework

The study applies an operationalised framework by Spencer and Charsley (2021) to analyse the lived experiences of unaccompanied minors. Each of these dimensions provides a specific lens through which to explore the particular challenges and opportunities associated with different legal statuses:

- ❖ Foundation: Analysing the impact of temporary versus permanent residence permits.
- ❖ Facilitators: Language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and housing stability.
- ❖ Social Relationships: Assessing the importance of peer networks and community relationships.
- ❖ Markers and Means: Investigating access to education, employment, and healthcare as measurable integration outcomes.

This framework organises the analysis but also provides an illustration of the interaction between the dimensions since a gap in one of them, legal status, trickles into other aspects of integration.

3.4 Contributions and Limitations of the Framework

One of the key strengths of this framework is its comprehensiveness. It thus allows for an analysis of integration from a multidimensional perspective. By underlining the interdependence of legal, social, and economic factors, it reveals the complexity of the experience that unaccompanied minors go through. However, such a framework may also gloss over some of the most critical aspects of integration: what individual agency can be afforded, for example, and how systemic discrimination affects these processes.

Besides, its applicability is usually assumed within robust institutional frameworks and may be limited in capturing minor experiences in less developed systems. This study

picks up where this limitation and others leave off by incorporating the voices of the unaccompanied minors in constructing the framework to include their lived experiences and nuanced contexts.

3.5 Conclusion

Spencer and Charsley's integration model provides a good groundwork for analysing the experiences of unaccompanied minors. By structuring this analysis around its four dimensions, the study ensures that it will be thorough and systematic in understanding the challenges and opportunities of integration. The framework speaks directly to legal status, social connections, and measurable outcomes, essential in understanding unaccompanied minors while they navigate their journey.

3.6 Gaps in the Literature

Although the literature provides valuable insights into the integration experiences of unaccompanied minors, there are still some gaps that are worth further research. Legal status and integration outcomes in this integration process: The role of legal status remains under explored, especially regarding temporary versus permanent permits. Most studies have focused on the legal challenges refugees or asylum-seekers face. However, little concentration is placed on how different legal statuses directly impact the long-term integration of minors. Most studies do not go further than considering the psychological and social impacts of prolonged uncertainty, such as waiting for a sentence or a legal decision in full. More work is needed to capture how this nuanced foundation of rights and citizenship interacts with other integration elements, such as education, employment, and social links.

3.6.1 Intersectionality and Diversity among Unaccompanied Minors

Moreover, studies often consider the category of unaccompanied minors as homogeneous, and little attention is given to how experiences based on intersectionality are treated. Though many studies touch upon such subjects as gender, cultural background, diversified age, or country of origin of the minors, insufficient attention is devoted to how these factors relate to legal status, language, and social support. This is a significant gap because unaccompanied minors coming from different backgrounds and with different gender or cultural identities may face challenges of integration in various ways. Further research is

needed in explaining these dynamics, particularly regarding social support networks and cultural identity.

3.6.2 The Role of Social Support Systems in Facilitating Integration

While the literature underlines how meaningful social connections are, such as Herz & Lalander (2021) and Ekström et al. (2021), less research evidence is available on how support systems at an institutional level, such as youth centres, social workers, and community-based organisations, directly help facilitate integration. Most research studies discuss the role of education and employment (Çelikaksoy & Wadensjö, 2019) but often fail to consider the role of support structures as facilitators in establishing social networks for minors. These institutions need a closer look concerning their ability to support integration and, in particular, their support for minors in legally unstable positions.

Long-term Outcomes of Integration and Well-being Most research on unaccompanied minors is oriented toward immediate access to education, housing, or other short-term outcomes, and few studies have been done regarding the integration process in a long-term perspective and the mental health impacts of either integration or lack of it. This includes the mental well-being of those who are in conditions of protracted uncertainty over their legal status or who are hampered in integrating because of experiences of discrimination or isolation.

Research on how mental health influences overall integration success and how the emotional needs of minors could be better met in integration programs is underdeveloped.

Impact of Migration Policies on Integration Most studies are limited to the direct influences of migration policies on the course of integration. Despite single studies, such as by Widman (2022), regarding, for example, the impact that changes in migration policy have caused in Sweden, the general consequences of shifts in policies, such as those being adopted by the Sweden Democrats through the institution of stricter rules, remain disregarded. Their meanings concerning the rights of unaccompanied minors, their opportunities to integrate, and their opportunities for social participation have to be studied much more closely. More importantly, this has explicitly become integral given the new political flux that might drastically alter the ability of minors to integrate or even stay in the country.

3.7 Future Research Directions

Future studies are encouraged on areas such as the following, based on the gaps seen in this study:

3.7.1 Exploring the intersection of legal status and integration

Further research should seek an in-depth investigation of exactly how different types of legal status (temporary, asylum-seeker, permanent) may directly impact unaccompanied minors' performance at school, their ability to find employment, or their ability to integrate into society altogether. This should be supported again by a longitudinal aspect to identify the long-term effects of a precarious or stable legal status on integration. Minor legal insecurity needs more attention to coping and the consequences for the youngsters' psychological well-being.

Intersectionality and Diversity among Unaccompanied Minors Further research is needed to explore the intersectionality of unaccompanied minors' experiences. Studies should consider not only gender but also other factors such as cultural background, country of origin, and age and how these intersect with legal status to shape integration outcomes.

It is also essential to explore how these factors influence cultural identity and mental health and, correspondingly, how the principles of integration policy could fit in with the diverse needs arising in different groups within a broad category of unaccompanied minors.

3.7.2 Impact of Social Support Systems

Research must also investigate how institutional support systems, such as social workers, community organisations, and peer networks, help unaccompanied minors by forming social inclusions and bridges to society. The proposed study will be done about the effectiveness of such institutional support systems where psychosocial support, mentorship, and other modes of practical resources are directed at the consequences of unaccompanied minors' social integration.

3.7.3 Long-Term Well-being and Integration

There is a dire need for research that focuses specifically on the long-term integration processes, be it the mental condition or the sense of integration of unaccompanied minors. Further analyses should focus on longitudinal impacts on educational outcomes such as attainment, labour markets, and social networks brought about by the challenges within the

realm of mental health experienced during this process. The extent to which psychosocial support programs and mental health services can enable long-run integration processes remains to be tested.

3.7.4 The Shaping Role of Policy on Integration

Further research is thus needed to establish how national migration policies, in particular, affect current integration outcomes of unaccompanied minors. Research may also investigate how specific policies, such as those relating to asylum-seeking, family reunification, and residency requirements, influence the minors' access to resources and ability to integrate into Swedish society. Further, comparative studies across countries with different immigration policies would yield valuable insights into the best approach to integrating unaccompanied minors. Integration in a Transnational Context Because integration is a nonlinear and non static process, future research should investigate how the integration process has been taking a transnational character for unaccompanied minors. How do minors maintain contact with their countries and cultures of origin while resettling in Sweden? The possibility exists to explore how minors develop dual identities and how that can influence a sense of belonging to their country of origin and Sweden.

Research could also be undertaken on how remittances, family reunification, and other transnational practices in the case of minors affect integration. Conclusion of the Literature Review: The integration processes in the case of unaccompanied minors may be better placed within the literature that elaborates on facilitative and impeding factors toward their ability to build stable lives in the country of their residence. Much as legal status, language acquisition, cultural fitting, and social networks all emerge as crucial from earlier research, several lacunae still exist, which require an address to fully comprehend the complex nature of integration for this vulnerable group. It also points out that future research is necessary concerning the nexus of legal status and integration, the intersectionality of the minors' experiences, the role of institutional support systems, and long-term well-being. Future research may contribute to the elaboration of better policies and practices that will further support the integration of unaccompanied minors, both in Sweden and beyond.

4.0 METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Design

The study's approach is a qualitative case study; the nature of the study in question makes it particularly relevant for investigating unaccompanied minors' integration experiences. A case study design allows for an in-depth understanding of specific contexts and phenomena, which would be ideal for looking into nuanced challenges and opportunities faced by these minors in Sweden. The research focuses on unaccompanied minors in Skåne, namely Malmö and Helsingborg, who arrived in Sweden from 2015 onward, providing a representative snapshot of the integration experiences within the Swedish migration system.

The study's qualitative nature prioritises participants' voices and lived experiences, emphasising a constructivist approach. This aligns with the theoretical framework by structuring data collection and analysis around Foundation (Rights and Citizenship), Facilitators (Language et al., and Stability), Social Connections (Bonds, Bridges, and Links), and **Markers and Means (Employment, Housing, Education, and Health).

4.2 Data Collection

The core data collection methods involved semi-structured interviews, which permit freedom while not excluding key themes from touching on the theoretical framework. Participants: Six unaccompanied minors were selected through purposive sampling in a way that varied in legal status, such as permanent residency, temporary permits, and asylum-seeking. Participants aged 18 to 20 years and included individuals living in HVB homes, stödboende, or independent housing arrangements.

Participant	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Age Entered Sweden	Accommodation	Legal Status
1	Male	20	Iraq (Mosul)	13	Apartment	Permanent residence permit
2	Male	18	Syria (Deir Ezzor)	14	HVB-home	Permanent residence permit

3	Male	19	Palestine (Syria)	13	Stödboende	Permanent residence permit
4	Male	20	Iraq (Mosul)	13	Shared apartment	Asylum seeker without residence permit
5	Male	19	Gaza	7	HVB-home	No residence permit (awaiting deportation)
6	Female	19	Somalia	13	HVB-home	Swedish citizen

Participant Profiles:

- Respondent 1: Male, 20, Iraq, permanent residence permit.
- Respondent 4: Male, 20, Iraq, asylum seeker without a residence permit.
- Respondent 6: Female, 19, Somalia, Swedish citizen.

Interview Process:

- ❖ It was done in a language of preference to the participant, such as Arabic, for comfort and authenticity.
- ❖ The questions were developed considering the research question and dimensions of theoretical discussion: legal status, language acquisition, cultural adaptation, social networks, and access to education/employment.
- ❖ Interviews lasted 45–60 minutes and were conducted in private, familiar settings such as participants' living spaces.

4.3 Rationale for Semi-Structured Interview

Semi-structured interviews are the primary tool of data gathering due to their flexibility and depth, so they are helpful in sensitive and complex topics such as the integration experiences of unaccompanied minors. In contrast to structured interviews, which

follow a rigid framework, semi-structured interviews offer more dynamic interaction between an interviewer and a participant. This approach will enable the researcher to adjust the questions since, in some instances, the responses provided may not be related to the topic at hand, allowing him to dig deeper when some emergent themes or unexpected topics are being tackled, as noted by Zapata-Barrero & Yalaz (2018).

Semi-structured interviews will be selected, corresponding to this study's constructivist epistemology, where knowledge is co-constructed in discourse. This method tends to ensure a rich data collection that entails nuances characteristic of the integration process, as explained by the unaccompanied minors themselves. More importantly, this study needed flexibility in semi-structured interviews, considering different linguistic and cultural backgrounds where most respondents needed questions in their relevant contexts. However, semi-structured interviews have their setbacks, too. The respondents may feel uncomfortable revealing their opinions, particularly on sensitive issues concerning their legal status, personal problems, or negative attitudes toward their cases. To minimise such a risk, the interviewer created an atmosphere of trust, privacy, and open-ended questions that allowed for opening up in answers. For example, instead of asking about traumatic experiences, questions were framed to invite participants to discuss aspects of their journey that they felt comfortable sharing. These techniques reduced social desirability bias and encouraged participants to provide authentic accounts of their integration experiences.

4.4 Data Analysis

Interview data were analysed thematically, systematically identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. This approach was adopted because it is flexible and provides insights compatible with this study's theoretical framework, as Spencer and Charsley (2021) have demonstrated.

Steps: Familiarisation

First, interview transcripts were reviewed line by line to get a comprehensive view of the data. This involved reading and re-reading transcripts, noting preliminary impressions, and identifying concepts discussed time and again. In this way, familiarisation allowed the researchers to immerse themselves within the data, ensuring that analysis was firmly rooted in participants' narratives.

Step 2: Coding

Next, the data were systematically coded. Codes were generated both inductively, from the data itself, and deductively, based on the dimensions of the theoretical framework.

Example:

Legal Status - Stability: Statements on how temporary or permanent permits affect integration were coded.

Language and Cultural Adaptation: Codes reflected the participants' experiences learning Swedish and cultural differences. This dual-coding approach allowed the analysis to capture both emergent themes and those explicitly linked to the theoretical framework.

Step 3: Identifying Theme

Following coding, the researcher organised related codes into broader themes that corresponded to the framework dimensions: Foundation (Rights and Citizenship), Facilitators (Language et al., and Stability), Social Connections (Bonds, Bridges, and Links), and Markers and Means (Employment, Housing, Education, and Health). This thematic mapping coherently framed the interpretation of data while keeping in sight the study's aims.

Interpretation Step 4: Finally, based on the research question, an interpretation of the identified themes has been made. The insights have been contextualised using relevant literature and policy documents outlining the implications of the findings. For instance, participant experiences of discrimination in education are compared to the earlier identification of systemic barriers by Lundberg, 2020.

4.5 Validity and Reliability

Since this is a comparative study, its validity and reliability must be rigorously ensured. The measures put in place included the following:

Triangulation: The interview data was further triangulated with data obtained from secondary sources, that is, previous studies and policy reports, to corroborate findings in order to enhance reliability.

Member checking involved participants reviewing their transcripts to verify the accuracy of their narratives and how their stories were being told.

Standardisation: The interview protocol should be the same for all interviews so that data collection can remain similar while allowing flexibility for unique contexts set forth by participants. It combined such measures to ensure that the methodology was not rigid but flexible and rigorous, enhancing the credibility of the results from this research study.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

Due to the vulnerability of the test participant group, special ethics-oriented considerations have been entertained every step of the way from the very beginning in which this study was constituted. These measures included the following:

- ❖ **Informed consent:** It was provided with an explanation of the research study for which the participants were to participate, the procedures involved, and any potential risks. Written consent was obtained before interviews were conducted.
- ❖ **Confidentiality:** The participants' anonymity was guaranteed; all pseudonyms were used, and all identifying information was removed from the transcripts. For example, when doing analysis, Participants were referred to as Respondent 1, 2, and so on during the discussions.
- ❖ **Support Services:** Participants were informed of any support services available, such as counselling or legal support for emotional distress related to the research.
- ❖ **Safeguards during research** guaranteed that participants did feel valued and supported during ethical research.

4.7 Positionally and Reflexivity

Such positioning by the researcher as a be handling assistant supported insight into the lived experiences of unaccompanied minors. On the other hand, such positionally did call for reflexivity to reduce bias. Reflexive practices included:

I am keeping a record of assumptions and reflections about the research process.

Regular consultation with colleagues with the intention of critical reviews of how their background factors have borne on the interpretation of data.

Recognising the role of the researcher-participant relationship in shaping shared narratives within interviews. Overall, the researcher used such reflexive strategies to ensure that the analysis remained objective in tone and couched in participants' voices.

4.8 Congruence with Theoretical Framework

The methodology was explicitly aligned with Spencer and Charsley's 2021 framework to ensure systematic data analysis: Foundation: Rights and citizenship questions examined how legal status influenced participants' Stability and access to resources. Facilitators (Language, Culture, Safety, and Stability): Interviews explored participants' experiences with language acquisition, cultural adaptation, and housing stability. Social Bonds, Bridges, and

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Links: Data reflected participants' relationships with peers, mentors, and institutional actors.

Means and Markers: Employment, Housing, Education, and Health The participants talked about facilitating tangible integration indicators: education and employment opportunities.

5.0 ANALYSIS

5.1 Foundation: Rights and Citizenship

Legal status provides the grounds for integration by opening up essential opportunities, resources, and even a sense of stability in the host country. Foundation, as described in the theoretical framework by Spencer and Charsley (2021), is about the rights and citizenship that create a base from which integration efforts are built. Participants' experiences in this study strongly reflect how legal stability can enable or impede their integration.

5.1.1 Stable Legal Status as a Pathway to Stability

Legal stability significantly reduced stress and uncertainty for participants with permanent residence permits or citizenship, who could focus on Education, employment, and social participation. As explained by Respondent 6, who had received Swedish citizenship, *"Receiving my passport removed a huge stress in my life and gave me a lot more time to focus on other things and improving myself."* It was also described by Respondent 1 how obtaining a residence permit transformed their integration experience: *"I couldn't integrate before the resident permit, but as soon as I received it, I started studying, learning the language and found a job"*.

In this case, stable legal status catalysed participants' integration. It gave me the confidence to approach long-term opportunities and set goals personally and professionally without the constant threat of deportation. This agrees with Widman (2022), who says that legal stability brings socio-economic inclusion and enables migrants to contribute meaningfully to their host societies.

5.1.2 Barriers Created by Temporary or Unresolved Legal Status

In contrast, participants reporting temporary or unresolved legal statuses identified significant issues undermining their integration ability. The following is what Respondent 4, awaiting the outcome of an appeal, had to say: *"It means everything. Without it, I'm alienated exist."* This poignantly captures a feeling of exclusion and invisibility for those without secure legal standing. Respondent 5, still waiting for deportation, described it thus: *"It is a horrible experience; I will not recommend someone seeking asylum in Sweden."*

Temporary permits often lack the stability that allows people to integrate because individuals have to renew their status regularly and go through a bureaucratic system that offers no guarantees. This precarious situation causes significant emotional and psychological problems, such as anxiety, depression, and a lesser feeling of belonging. Lind et al. (2023) discuss how this uncertainty mainly affects young refugees' full engagement in Education, work, or activities in the community.

5.1.3 Legal Status and Access to Opportunities

Legal status extends to real-life opportunities, including Education, employment, and housing. Whereas the participants with permanent residence permits could enjoy these facilities more efficiently, the participants with temporary or unresolved statuses faced systemic barriers. As put by Respondent 2, who had a permanent residence permit: *"It makes me focus on achieving my goals since I don't have to worry about legal issues."* On the contrary, Respondent 4 explained: *"I can't find a job because I don't have a Swedish personal number, and without that, no one wants to employ me"*.

The lack of legal recognition is not only an entry barrier to resources but even creates a way to consecrate exclusion from mainstream society. Lack of legal recognition is an entry barrier to other resources and even a mode to consecrate exclusion in mainstream society. Respondent 5, whose temporary permit was revoked, described disconnection with their surroundings: *"I feel like I'm living in limbo. I don't belong anywhere, and it's hard to focus on anything when you're unsure about your future."*

5.1.4 Social Implications of Legal Status

Legal status shapes how society regards and relates to unaccompanied minors. Those with no stable permits reported enduring situations of exclusion and discrimination attributed to their lack of permits. According to respondent 1, *"Swedish people are hesitant to interact with us because they see us as temporary or not fully part of their society."* These feelings encourage separation between communities and set a new limit on the immigrants' potential to settle down.

Even among those with consolidated legal statuses, the stigma of being a migrant still lingers. Respondent 3 highlighted, *"Even though I already have a permit, people still see me differently. It's like I always have to prove that I belong here."* This underlines the interplay between legal status and attitudes in society. Although legal stability may be necessary, breaking deep-rooted stereotypes and biases is not always sufficient.

5.1.5 The Role of Government Policies

Government policies on migration and legal status set an essential basis for the experiences of unaccompanied minors. Indeed, participants expressed concerns that residence permits took too long and that the process was often unclear. Respondent 6 explained, *"It took so long to get an answer from the migration office. The waiting period was the most stressful part because I didn't know my future."* Respondent 3 adds, *"I think the government should prioritise answers faster. The uncertainty is unbearable."*

The new migration policies introduced in Sweden have introduced more stringent regulations, making the situation even more complex for unaccompanied minors. According to Respondent 4, *"It's already hard enough to get a permit, and now it's even harder. I feel like they're trying to push us out."* Such policies place even higher demands on permanent residency, deteriorating the challenges for young refugees and making their integration harder.

5.1.6 Implications for Integration

Such a legal status is highlighted as being at the heart of participants' experiences regarding the integration process itself, in the way that those with permits and citizenship were allowed to seize opportunities and work out stable and secure living, whereas exclusion, non-certainty, and fewer resources defined their fate in a case when one was far from such legal stability. These findings confirm the discussed theoretical framework, which suggests that Foundation is the underlying dimension of other dimensions and indicates how one's legal status makes a difference in all sizes.

Participants' testimonies also reveal that policies are needed that prioritizeability for unaccompanied minors. The timely and secure granting of residence permits would alleviate the emotional and psychological burdens of legal precocity and give these individuals a more significant potential to contribute to Swedish society. These complex problems require a multi-dimensional response; recognising status is fundamental in shaping integration outcomes.

5.2 Facilitators: Language, Culture, Safety, and Stability

According to Spencer and Charsley (2021), facilitators include relevant factors that may permit unaccompanied minors to relate to or interact with the new setting. Fundamental aspects of life, such as language, culture, a sense of safety, and stability, contribute to

lowering barriers to make integration easier. This section discusses each of these facilitators and further describes how they influenced or shaped the participants' responses.

5.2.1 Language Acquisition as a Gateway to Integration

The emerging sub theme of language acquisition illustrates that it was an essential enabler for integration, facilitating access to Education, jobs, and social networks. Many participants highlighted the hard work required to learn Swedish initially but how it had greatly helped them integrate into Swedish society. Respondent 6 reflects thus: *"Learning the language felt almost impossible at first, but with time and commitment, I managed to continue my Education and eventually find a job."*

Respondent 3 commented: *"I started with learning Swedish and made some Swedish friends."* Language not only served utilitarian purposes in daily life, such as taking care of daily needs and obtaining services, but it also facilitated one's belonging to the place. By communicating appropriately in Swedish, the participants could feel closer to the host community.

However, respondents also discussed difficulties with language acquisition. For instance, Respondent 4 reported difficulty learning Swedish and discussed how it was a barrier: *"The language was one challenging thing, and without it, I felt isolated."* These findings align with research by Çelikaksoy and Wadensjö (2019), who concluded that language ability is necessary for work and school in Sweden. Without language, unaccompanied minors are often excluded from the most critical aspects of integration.

5.2.2 Cultural Adaptation and Identity Negotiation

Another facilitator was cultural adaptation, which requires the participants to negotiate between maintaining their cultural identity and adapting to new societal norms. In the words of Respondent 2, "You have to be brave because the world doesn't care about your problems. You have to handle them on your own." This comment illustrates the resilience and adaptability that many unaccompanied minors develop in the face of cultural and social challenges.

Participants often described this dual process of cultural adaptation, where one learns and then adopts Swedish customs but keeps one's cultural traditions intact. Respondent 6 explained, *"I still carry on my culture and traditions, but I've also learned to adapt to Swedish ways of doing things."* Such a balancing act is essential to developing a sense of belonging without losing one's cultural identity.

At the same time, cultural adjustment posed quite a big challenge. Various participants reported feeling misunderstood or being judged due to culturally ascribed attributes. According to Respondent 5, *"Living with people with different behaviours was difficult. It made me feel like I didn't belong."* Such experiences, therefore, argue for an environment of cultural inclusiveness that allows recognition and appreciation of diversity.

5.2.3 Safety and Stability as Foundations for Growth

Safety and stability, primarily through housing, have enabled participants to embark on integration. Participants who lived in HVB homes reported support from staff who guided and supported them with their needs. Respondent 2 reported, *"The staff guided me through my teenage years and helped with cooking, cleaning, and homework."* Such environments provided the participant with a sense of safety and structure that enabled the participant to focus on Education and personal development.

Nevertheless, for respondents who did not have stable housing or whose legal status was precarious, feelings of unsafely and insecurity heavily affected any prospects for integration. For instance, Respondent 4, staying in a shared apartment while waiting for the court's decision, also reported: *"I'm struggling to get a resident permit, and there is no integration process for me."* In that line, the insecurity created the spiral of non-engagement from Education and employment to social activities.

Lundberg and Dahlquist's (2021) work identifies a steady place of housing as essential, indicating the function of secure living environments in furthering integration. Housing can provide much-needed physical safety for unaccompanied minors, along with an establishment of routines and means for accessing resources.

5.2.4 Overcoming Challenges in Facilitators

Personal and systemic issues were commonly identified as hindering participants from accessing and benefiting from facilitators. For instance, Respondent 4 talked about how having to learn Swedish and not having stable housing because of a lack of legal status was particularly challenging: *"The language was one challenging thing, but finding a job was harder because I don't have a Swedish personal number."* This would suggest that facilitators are interconnected; difficulties in one area, such as legal status, can impact other dimensions. Respondent 5 stated, *"When I was younger, I didn't have the right environment to integrate naturally. It does not happen independently; it requires support and guidance."* This relates

to the need for special programs to address the challenges that unaccompanied minors face in adapting to a new culture and environment.

5.2.5 The Role of Support Systems

Support systems, such as language programs, cultural orientation initiatives, and housing services, played a significant role in participants' integration experiences. Respondents highly valued language support programs, which allowed Respondent 6 to say, *"The language classes helped me feel more confident and capable of participating in school and work."* Similarly, Respondent 3 echoed the importance of community initiatives: *"Youth centres and community programs made it easier to meet people and feel part of something"*. Other apparent gaps in the support system: Those without legal status almost invariably report experiencing difficulties in getting service or sensed what was available didn't help: *"I didn't feel like I had the right environment or resources to succeed. Everything felt like a struggle."*

5.2.6 Implications for Integration

The stories that participants shared signal precisely the path the facilitators decisively contribute to in integration outcomes. Besides giving them safety and stability, this place of residence laid the Foundation for personal and professional development. Language acquisition was shown as opening an important portal towards further study or employment, and cultural adjustment gave them a way around social dynamics and getting linked with others.

These findings support the facilitator dimension of Spencer and Charsley's framework (2021) in that such elements facilitate unaccompanied minors' engagement with their new environment. At the same time, however, they indicate that systemic barriers, such as legal constraints and a lack of adequate support programs, need to be addressed for all unaccompanied minors to benefit from these facilitators.

5.3 Social Connections: Bonds, Bridges, and Links

Social networks continue to play a critical role in the reduction of isolation, fostering feelings of inclusion, and allowing unaccompanied minors to integrate into their host communities. Spencer and Charsley's (2021) theoretical framework categories strategic connections as bonds, bridges, and links, representing different kinds of relationships for

integration. The section explores how participants experienced and navigated these social connections during their integration processes.

5.3.1 Social Bonds: Connections within Cultural or Ethnic Groups

Social bonds herein refer to relationships within one's cultural or ethnic group. These allowed participants to be in their comfort zone, as it provided them with familiarity. For some, these bonds acted as the primary support system, most especially during the early days of their integration process. Respondent 2 stated, *"In the beginning, I became friends with people with the same ethnicity as me, but over time, I got to know people from different ethnicities, including Swedes."*

These relationships, therefore, assisted participants in coping with challenges related to adjustment and settling into a new environment while maintaining a connection with their cultural heritage. Respondent 5 said, *"Having people from my background made it easier to feel understood and less alone."* Sometimes, this reliance on social bonds limited the opportunity for broader integration. This can be seen in the testimony of Respondent 1: *"All my friends are not native Swedes; I only interact with Swedes at work"*.

5.3.2 Social Bridges: Connections between Cultural Groups

One of the most significant barriers to integration among participants in the present research was the social bridges- the social links between respondents and their Swedish peers. As long as the language barriers, cultural barriers, or social stereotypes do not inhibit them, developing these social processes of bridge-building can prevent various types of conflicts among cultures. In the opinion of Respondent 6: *"It's difficult making friends and taking courses; it makes you feel like an outsider."* Likewise, Respondent 1 shared, *"Swedish people are not social and seem scared of us as foreigners, maybe because of the media."*

Many wished for organised societies to be exposed to native Swedes. As one respondent says, *"More activities to mix young immigrants with Swedish people would help."* This indicates that organised events, like community events or school events, are crucial in bridging the cultural gap and tearing down social barriers.

At the same time, some of them succeeded in finding a way to bridge their cultural backgrounds, either through an activity that they share or through workplaces. According to Respondent 4: *"I go to the gym a lot, and I have a big circle of connections, though most are not Swedish."* Thus, shared interests provide a neutral ground for interaction.

5.3.3 Social Links: Connections to Institutions and Organisations

Individual factors, institutional connections, and relations with schools, youth centres, and community organise organisations forward as significant facilitators in the integration process. They ensured resources, counselled, or at least provided an opportunity for contact with other people. *"Youth centres and community programs made it easier to meet people and feel part of something."* said respondent 2.

Respondent 3: *"Attending youth centres around Malmö helped me connect with others and feel less isolated."* Many participants reported that such institutional ties served as bridges to facilitate their interactions with compatriots from different backgrounds and Swedish society at large.

In contrast, participants at organisations with solid institutional support presented experiences of isolation and not feeling included. According to Participant 5's response, *"I didn't feel like there were enough resources to help me connect with others or feel included."* Indeed, this suggests that the availability and effectiveness of various support systems within institutions may be far from even, especially those that would significantly affect the integration experience for unaccompanied minors.

5.3.4 Challenges in Building Social Connections

Several challenges were identified that hampered the development of social networks. Language was the most common factor that prevented respondents from developing a social network. Respondent 4 reported, *"Even though I tried to make Swedish friends, it was difficult to keep the relationships because of the language"*.

Discrimination and stereotypes in society also contributed to feelings of exclusion. *"I felt more understood, less judged when communicating with people who were not Swedish,"* reflected Respondent 6. These narratives also correspond to Herz and Lalander's (2021) regarding discrimination hindering the social inclusion of unaccompanied minors. Participants also named schools and communities that are segregated as one of the obstacles to integration. In the opinion of Respondent 3, *"I believe there are schools for mainly Swedes and other schools for mainly foreigners in Malmö. I wish it were more mixed."* Such a lack of intermingling between groups reinforces societal segregation and further restricts avenues for fruitful engagement.

5.3.5 Strategies for Enhancing Social Connections

Strategies for participants to make and sustain social contacts despite these challenges included the following: Extracurricular activities such as sports or community events could provide a venue for interacting with peers. One respondent remarked, *“It’s much easier to talk, connect, and make friends when participating in shared activities.”*

Other recommendations related to inclusive places that may allow young immigrants to interact more with native Swedes: according to Respondent 2, *“Programs that bring teenagers together, regardless of background, would help build better connections.”*

5.3.6 Implications for Integration

These participants' experiences signify the role of social relationships in fostering inclusion and breaking isolation. Social bonds were places of emotional support and comfort, while social bridges and links created avenues for connecting to broader society. Systemic barriers usually ban them from forming such links due to deficiencies in language and other factors, such as societal stereotyping.

These findings accord with Spencer and Charsley's (2021) framework, which reflects how the character of relationships in and across cultural groups influences the outcomes of integration. Such a situation demands a targeted intervention for these challenges, such as language support, inclusive community projects, and activities against discrimination. With increased social networking, unaccompanied minors can create a network that best enables them to function adequately in Swedish society.

5.4 Markers and Means: Employment, Housing, Education, and Health

Markers and means are concrete representations of rights that provide evidence of what unaccompanied minors had access to regarding development opportunities and eventually becoming independent. This layer of Spencer and Charsley's (2021) framework brings into relief the areas of Education, employment, housing, and health as quantifiable results of good integration. The participants' narratives bring forth both the availabilities of opportunity and the systemic barriers to accessing the essential resources.

5.4.1 Education: A Gateway to Integration

Education became an essential way of integration because it equipped unaccompanied minors with the relevant working skills and social interaction. Access to Education was

highlighted by the participants with a stable legal status. Respondent 6 shared: *“When I learned the language, I was able to start my education and then found work.”* Respondent 1 also stated: *“I studied Swedish and then attended vocational training, which helped me secure a job.”*

For participants, Education provided practical skills and a sense of belonging and purpose. As respondent 2, a high school student, identifies, *“Education helps you feel like you're moving forward. It's not just about learning; it's about being part of something.”* All other things being equal, and despite systemic barriers, all participants without stable legal status had limited access. As described by Respondent 4: *“Without a Swedish personal number, it was hard to enrol in certain programs or apply for financial aid.”* This lack of accessibility undermines the potential for the educational process to be turned toward supporting integration.

Participants also discussed being treated unequally within in-school settings, especially in schools where student immigrant populations were high. Some, like Respondent 3, reported: *“In my school, there were very few Swedish students. I wish it were more mixed because it felt like we were segregated.”* This all points to the importance of more inclusive and diverse compositions in school settings as a part of the integration process in schools.

5.4.2 Employment: Building Self-Sufficiency

Other substantial evidence of social integration dealt with employment, which brought in an income and made them friendly. The persons holding permanent residence permits narrated their experiences about their access to regular jobs. Respondent 1 said, *“I found a job in the clothing company after finishing my training program.”* Another respondent, 6, working as a personal assistant, said, *“Work gave me the confidence and made me feel contributing to society.”*

Employment opportunities were quite stressful for respondents with no legal status in the country. In this light, Respondent 4 highlighted: *“I was lucky to find a part-time job, but most places would not hire me without a Swedish personal number.”* Without such proof, their labour market participation would become considerably hampered; they face significant barriers, continuing in financial preparation/exclusion conditions.

At the same time, participants also mentioned the enabling function of language proficiency regarding finding jobs: Respondent 5 said, *“Even if you find a job, not knowing Swedish makes it harder to communicate and advance.”* This illustrates how some elements

within the framework are linked; one facilitator, language competency, predisposes to obtaining markers, for example, finding employment.

These were further compounded by discrimination in the labour market. According to Respondent 1, *"It feels like employers are hesitant to hire foreigners because of stereotypes."* This is in line with findings by Rydgren (2004) on ethnic discrimination in the Swedish labour market, an effect that has been biased against immigrants and refugees.

5.4.3 Housing: A Foundation for Stability

Housing became an essential factor in participants' experiences of integration. Those placed in supportive housing, like the HVB homes, were placed where they could feel safe and well cared for. According to Respondent 2, *"The staff in the HVB home helped me do practical things like cooking and cleaning, which made it easier for me to focus on school."* Likewise, Respondent 1 reflected on her move into supported housing: *"I was prepared for the move. I now have more privacy and independence"*.

People experiencing homelessness reported frustration and alienation. For instance, Respondent 5, waiting to be deported, replied, *"I feel alienated, and my future is uncertain."* These feelings of insecurity often prevented participants from fully engaging with integration opportunities.

As Lundberg and Dahlquist (2012) underline, stable housing is crucial for integration because it provides a place to establish routines and focus on the minors' personal development. The participants' experiences strongly support this finding by illustrating how housing stability enables or hinders access to other markers of integration.

5.4.4 Health: Physical and Mental Well-Being

A further important indicator of integration, less explicitly mentioned but very much present in participants' contributions, was health, including physical and mental. Some remarks implied the influence of legal and social obstacles on mental health. For instance, Respondent 4 remarked, *"The uncertainty of my legal status makes it hard to focus on anything else." It's always on my mind.*" Similarly, Respondent 5 said: *"I feel stressed and anxious all the time because I don't know what's going to happen next."*

Access to healthcare services was not a significant theme in participants' accounts, but their remarks suggested that mental health provision is vital to successful integration. The emotional toll of migration and uncertainty can be overwhelming; addressing this effectively

will be essential to ensure both the well-being of the unaccompanied minors themselves and their ability to engage with other aspects of integration.

5.4.5 Barriers to Accessing Markers and Means

Systemic barriers prevented participants from fully benefiting from Education, employment, housing, and health services. Those with no stable legal status suffered the most since lack of recognition shut the doors to many opportunities. Respondent 4 noted, *“Without a resident permit, it feels like every door is closed.”* All these issues were further complicated by the additional burdens of linguistic barriers and discrimination, entrenching a cycle of exclusion in which progress within various dimensions could hardly be made. "You cannot move forward in life," said Respondent 6, *“It’s hard to move forward when you feel like you’re constantly being judged or underestimated.”*

5.4.6 Implications for Integration

The participants' experiences demonstrate how access to Education, employment, housing, and health are simultaneously markers of integration and means towards integration. Those with regular legal status were in better positions to capitalise on opportunities, while there were many barriers for others. Such findings confirm Spencer and Charsley's (2021) Markers and Means dimension and point to interlinked integration processes.

They are overcoming such barriers calls for targeted intervention, especially in ensuring more educational and employment opportunities for people with no legal status, combating labour market discrimination, and guaranteeing stable housing conditions for all unaccompanied minors. Only by breaking down barriers within the system can these unaccompanied minors continue with better markers of their integration into society and contribute to the host society as a whole.

6.0 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Findings

Integration experiences of unaccompanied minors in Sweden, and most importantly, how legal status intersects with all four dimensions in Spencer and Charsley's (2021) theoretical framework: Foundation (Rights and Citizenship), Facilitators (Language, Culture, Safety, and Stability), Social Connections (Bonds, Bridges, and Links), and Markers and Means (Employment, Housing, Education, and Health). The findings reveal a complex and multifaceted integration process shaped by legal, social, cultural, and systemic factors. Participants shed light on the opportunities provided and barriers faced in terms of their experiences, which called for the need to target systemic inequalities and inclusive politics.

6.2 Foundation: Rights and Citizenship

Legal status emerged as the cornerstone of integration, influencing whether participants could access resources and plan their futures. Those with permanent residence permits or citizenship were reportedly more stable and confident in pursuing Education and job opportunities. Respondent 6 explained, *"Receiving my passport removed a huge stress in my life and gave me a lot more time to focus on other things and improving myself."* In contrast, participants with temporary or unresolved legal statuses described significant emotional and practical barriers. As Respondent 4 said, *"Without it, I'm alienated exist"*.

These findings are supported by Widman's (2022) observation that "legal precocity undermines socio-economic integration through the fostering of insecurity and limitation of access to critical opportunities." This study, therefore, stresses timely and stable residence permits to minimise the psychological burden for unaccompanied minors and allow them to focus on long-term goals.

6.3 Facilitators: Language, Culture, Safety, and Stability

Language was a facilitator of integration in all ways, from Education and employment to social interactions. In the words of Respondent 3: *"I started with learning Swedish and made a couple of Swedish friends."* At the same time, however, learning a new language was often a challenge, especially when there was no supportive environment. A funny thing mentioned by respondent 4 in the interview is: *"The language was one challenging thing; finding a job was harder since I don't have a Swedish personal number."*

While cultural adaptation allowed participants to be actively involved in Swedish society, it was a balancing act between new norms and their own cultural identities. As Respondent 2 expressed, *"You have to be brave because the world doesn't care about your problems. You have to handle them on your own."* This duality of adaptation and preservation underlines the complexity of integration as a social and cultural phenomenon.

Safety and stability were featured mainly in the form of accommodation, and participants were provided with security, which allowed them to think about personal and career building. Participants who had a roof above their heads in HVB houses reported staff supportiveness there. In contrast, participants living unstably reported not knowing where they could reside or being alienated in this respect. The results presented herein correspond with an argument by Lundberg and Dahlquist (2012) that supportive contexts facilitate integration.

6.4 Social Capital: Bonds, Bridges, and Links

Social networks proved significant in the integration process because respondents pointed out that relationships helped dissolve isolation and created a network of belonging. In their own cultural or ethnic groups, social networks provided emotional support through the familiar, while Swedish peer groups were more complicated. As Respondent 6 commented, *"It's difficult making friends and taking courses; it makes you feel like an outsider."*

The most helpful institutional links came through youth centres and community programs, which served as conduits across cultural groups. Respondent 2: *"Youth centres and community programs made meeting people and feeling part of something easier."* However, participants identified specific systemic barriers to meaningful connection, such as language deficiencies and societal stereotypes. Herz and Lalander's (2021) study on how social networks affect the inclusion of unaccompanied minors supports these findings. Overcoming these barriers calls for focused measures encouraging cross-cultural interaction and reducing discrimination.

6.5 Markers and Means: Employment, Housing, Education, and Health

Another concrete indication of integration was access to Education and employment, which were representative of the participants' potential engagement with Swedish society. The ones with permanent permits relate possibilities they could grasp: continuing their school

or finding an important job. *"I studied Swedish and found a job at a clothing company."* said respondent 1.

Conversely, those without legal status faced significant obstacles from such markers. According to respondent 4, *"The language was challenging, but finding a job was harder because I don't have a Swedish personal number."* Such obstacles were perpetuated in the labour market, as discrimination tended to increase the already existing obstacles through stereotyping immigrants as potential poor workers (Rydgren, 2004).

In essence, this housing stability assured the participants that they would focus on Education and work. Those who didn't have secure housing reported feelings of alienation and a lack of certainty. As mentioned, Respondent 5 voiced frustration while awaiting deportation: *"I feel alienated, and my future is uncertain."* These results indicate that many of the markers in the theoretical framework are not separate but interlinked, with access to one marker often influencing the rest.

6.6 Addressing Systemic Barriers

The study identifies several systemic barriers that make the process of integration hard for unaccompanied minors, including the following:

- 1. Legal Constraints:** The absence of timely and stable residence permits is highly problematic, creating a situation of great uncertainty and exclusion.
- 2. Language Deficiencies:** Limited access to language programs delays participants' ability to engage with Education and employment.
- 3. Discrimination:** Stereotypes and biases from society contribute to a lack of opportunity for social interaction and inclusion into the labour market.
- 4. Segregated environment:** Schools and communities with high levels of immigration that limit contact with native Swedes.

Surmounting these barriers shall entail comprehensive policy reforms, selective programming, and community-based activities. In this direction, for instance, smoothing out procedures in residence permits would discard both the psychological and practical inconvenience of unaccompanied minors so that their primary concern would be how best to settle in a country. Extending language programs and creating supportive and inclusive learning environments would increase immigrant youth's ability to succeed at school and work.

6.7 Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings have important implications for policymakers, service providers, and community organisation unaccompanied minors. Key recommendations include the following:

- 1. Legal Certainty First:** Offering timely and safe residence permits would help minors overcome the primary obstacles to their integration and enable them to look ahead with longer-term goals.
- 2. Enhancing Support Systems:** Expanding access to language programs, vocational training, and mental health services would equip minors with the necessary tools to succeed.
- 3. Building Inclusive Communities:** Opportunities for interaction between young immigrants and native Swedes at schools or through community events would forge social bridges and fight stereotypes.
- 4. Addressing Discrimination:** Anti-discrimination policies in schools and the workplace would minimise inclusion and belonging.

6.8 Contributions to Theory and Research

This paper adds to the theoretical understanding of integration by applying the framework of Spencer and Charsley (2021) to the lived experiences of unaccompanied minors. The findings detailed in this paper demonstrate how these dimensions interact with one another: shortcomings in one aspect, such as legal, trickle down into other elements, including Education, employment, and social bonds. These findings suggest a holistic integration approach that addresses structural and individual factors.

The study also highlights several gaps in the literature on how legal status intersects with integration outcomes. Future research, including in other countries that have different immigration policies, should examine these gaps to offer comparative insights.

6.9 Concluding Reflections

The integration of unaccompanied minors is a complex, continuous process influenced by legal, social, and systemic factors. This study emphasises the vulnerability and agency of unaccompanied minors as they face these challenges and the critical role of supportive environments in fostering their integration. While systemic barriers persist, targeted interventions and inclusive policies can create pathways for these individuals to thrive and contribute to their host societies.

By addressing the root challenges of legal precocity, enabling factors like language and cultural adaptation, and social connections, Sweden can develop an inclusive society that values the contributions of unaccompanied minors. This calls for the commitment of policymakers, service providers, and communities to ensure protection and an assured path toward building a worthwhile life for every migrant in their new home.

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