

The educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors who have fled their country of origin: a systematic review

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Abstract

Background: Although unaccompanied refugee minors are often perceived as a vulnerable group of young people, they are also highly resilient and motivated when overcoming challenges. One of the challenges unaccompanied minors are faced with is enrolling into (higher) education. Research has shown that unaccompanied minors are not always provided with the adequate support to meet their educational needs.

Objective: The aim of this study was to provide an overview of the different educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors, and the barriers and facilitators that hinder or help realize these aspirations.

Methods: A systematic literature research has been conducted to answer the research questions and provide an overview. The search engines PsychINFO, ERIC and Web of Science have been used to find suitable articles. In total 12 articles have been found.

Results: Unaccompanied minors have a range of different educational and professional aspirations. They have goals for specific studies and jobs they would like to achieve, but also goals in a broader sense. Most unaccompanied minors talk in sequences or life plans when it comes to their aspirations. A supportive social network and being able to learn the native language were perceived as helpful in achieving their aspirations. Financial struggles and mental health problems were perceived as hindering in achieving their aspirations.

Conclusions: Unaccompanied minors have many different educational and professional aspirations. The barriers and facilitators that hinder and help them achieve these aspirations are in ways interconnected. Unaccompanied minors show a lot of determination when it comes to achieving their aspirations.

Keywords: unaccompanied minors, educational aspirations, professional aspirations

Samenvatting

Achtergrond: Hoewel alleenstaande minderjarigen vluchtelingen vaak gezien worden als een kwetsbare groep jonge mensen, zijn ze ook zeer veerkrachtig en gemotiveerd wanneer zij in aanraking komen met uitdagingen. Een van de uitdagingen waar alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen mee te maken krijgen is toegang krijgen tot (hoger) onderwijs. Onderzoek laat zien dat alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen niet altijd worden voorzien met de juiste ondersteuning voor hun educatieve behoeften.

Doelen: Het doel van dit onderzoek was het geven van een overzicht van de verschillende educatieve en professionele aspiraties van alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen, en de hinderende en helpende factoren die bij het behalen van deze aspiraties kunnen belemmeren of helpen.

Methode: Een systematisch literatuuronderzoek is uitgevoerd om antwoord te kunnen geven op de onderzoeksvragen en om een overzicht teg even. De zoekmachines PsychINFO, ERIC en Web of Science zijn gebruikt om geschikte artikelen te verzamelen. In totaal zijn 12 artikelen gevonden.

Resultaten: Alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen hebben een reeks verschillende educatieve en professionele aspiraties. Ze hebben doelen voor specifieke studies en banen die ze graag willen behalen, maar ook in bredere zin. De meeste alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen hebben het in series of levensplannen over hun aspiraties. Een ondersteunend sociaal netwerk en in staat zijn om de taal van het gastland te leren werden gezien als behulpzaam bij het behalen van hun aspiraties. Financiële moeilijkheden en mentale gezondheidsproblemen werden gezien als hinderlijk bij het behalen van hun aspiraties.

Conclusie: Alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen hebben verschillende educatieve en professionele aspiraties. De hinderende en helpende factoren die bij het behalen van deze

aspiraties kunnen belemmeren of helpen, zijn op bepaalde manieren met elkaar verbonden. Alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen laten veel determinatie zien als het gaat om het behalen van hun aspiraties.

Sleutelwoorden: alleenstaande minderjarige vluchtelingen, educatieve aspiraties, professionele aspiraties

Introduction

“We must dream big” is what Mojtaba Tavakoli said in his speech as a science-graduate at the age of 23 years old (Womack, 2017). Mojtaba had fled his home country at the age of 13 together with his 18-year-old brother Morteza after the Taliban had taken over their farm in Afghanistan. During their flight to Europe Morteza had drowned at sea, leaving Mojtaba to continue alone.

In 2021 around 427.460 refugees have applied for asylum in Europe. Of these 427.460 refugees, about 27.070 were ‘unaccompanied minors’, which is 6.3 percent (IND, 2022). In Europe an ‘unaccompanied minor’ is a child under the age of 18, who arrives in the European Union (EU) without an adult who is responsible for them by law or according to the practice of the concerning EU member state; or a minor who is left unaccompanied after entering the EU (European Commission, n.d.). In the United States an unaccompanied minor is defined as someone who enters the United States under the age of 18, without lawful status, and without an accompanying parent or legal guardian (National Immigrant Justice Center, n.d.).

Studies among the United States and 22 EU countries have found that unaccompanied minors flee their country of origin for numerous different reasons (European Migration Network [EMN], 2010; Zak 2020). Often there is not a single reason for fleeing, but rather multiple interconnected factors that force youth to flee. Unaccompanied minors seek protection from: war; riots and torture; poverty; natural catastrophes; gang violence; military recruitment; discrimination against their ethnicity, religious beliefs, or gender; honor-related violence; female genital mutilation; forced marriage; sexual abuse; forced prostitution; slavery and child labor. Some unaccompanied minors fear persecution, abuse, exploitation, and violence as a result of these factors, forcing them to flee and uproot their lives.

Seeking safety is often the primary aspiration of unaccompanied minors who flee their country of origin, however it is not always the only aspiration (Vervliet, et al., 2015).

Unaccompanied minors flee their country of origin in a period of their lives in which usually exploring their educational, occupational, and familial identity is of high importance (Kalakoski & Nurmi, 1998). Vervliet et al. (2015) concludes that not all the aspirations of unaccompanied minors are linked to the reasons of fleeing the country of origin. Some unaccompanied minors have had educational and professional aspirations prior to being forced to flee. Other unaccompanied minors might develop new or different aspirations during the flight and asylum-seeking process (EMN, 2010; Stevenson & Willot, 2007; Vervliet et al., 2013). Unaccompanied minors are often perceived as ‘vulnerable’ or ‘at risk’ (Badri et al., 2020, Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010). Many unaccompanied minors are faced with traumatic experiences along their journeys which can be predictors for different mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, PTSD, behavioral problems, and suicidal thoughts (Daniel-Calveras et al., 2022; Jensen et al., 2014; Jensen et al., 2019). Unaccompanied minors are at greater risk of psychological distress, sleeping problems, depression and PTSD than accompanied minors (Daniel-Calveras et al., 2022). However, research has shown that this group of young people is also highly resilient in overcoming the different challenges they face (Badri et al., 2020; Lynnebakke & Pastoor, 2020; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; Oppedal et al., 2017). Some of the challenges unaccompanied minors may be confronted with are mental health problems, enrolling into (higher) education and completing their courses (Stevenson & Willot, 2007; Beier et al., 2022). Unaccompanied refugee children are not always provided with adequate support and facilities from local authorities or the school system to meet their specific educational needs. Information regarding accessing the (higher) education system is not always available and often contradictory, confusing, or incorrect. In addition, many young refugees are not deemed to be qualified for higher education because their capabilities and potential may be underestimated due to poor language skills. Even though there are unaccompanied minor refugees who face difficulties concerning their education; they also show high levels of

resilience and motivation to succeed in school (Lynnebakke & Pastoor, 2020; Ní Raghallaigh & Gilligan, 2010; Oppedal et al., 2017).

This current study aims to give an overview of what the educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors who flee their country of origin entail. This study will also review which barriers hinder and which facilitators help with the realization of educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors. The existing literature on unaccompanied minors and education focusses mainly on mental health and resilience (Badri et al., 2020; Daniel et al., 2022). A systematic literature review about the educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors is yet to be added to the scientific field. It is important for unaccompanied refugees to be seen as more than refugees. Unaccompanied refugee minors are often seen as just refugees or perceived as vulnerable, however they have multiple identities as sons, daughters, students and simply children (Vervliet et al., 2015). An overview of these educational and professional aspirations can give some insight into who the people behind the label ‘unaccompanied minors’ are, other than refugees.

Unaccompanied minors are not just refugees; they are also students who have a right to an education and a right to information and guidance with their career and educational choice. The International Convention on the Rights of the Child contains 54 articles with agreements on the rights of children and youths up to 18 years old (UN, 1989). A total of 196 countries have ratified the Convention (Unicef, n.d.). Article 28 states that all children have a right to education. Primary education must be available without cost and higher and vocational education must be accessible for every child. Not only must this be accessible, but it should also be provided at an educational level fitting for the intelligence and competences for each individual child. Information on and guidance with career and educational choice should be available and accessible as well.

The following research questions have been formulated: (1) What are the educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors who flee their country of origin? (2) Which barriers and facilitators hinder or help realize the educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors?

Methods

A qualitative systematic literature review has been conducted to answer the research questions. This systematic review has been performed in accordance with the checklist of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses provided by PRISMA (Page et al., 2021).

To obtain the literature needed for the systematic review, articles have been searched using the search engines ‘ERIC’, ‘PsychINFO’ and ‘Web of Science’. Eric is an online database for education science, PsychINFO is an online database for behavioral and social sciences and Web of Science is an online database for multiple different sciences.

Search terms have been compiled for the execution of the search. These search terms have been composed of the keywords and synonyms of recurrent terms in existing literature about unaccompanied minors who have fled their country of origin and their educational and professional aspirations. The search terms are the keywords: ‘fled their country of origin’, ‘unaccompanied’, ‘educational’, ‘professional’ and ‘aspiration’, and/or synonyms and variations of these keywords. Table 1 shows an overview of the different search terms.

Table 1.

Keywords and synonyms used for search query

Keywords	Synonyms
Fled their country of origin	‘refugee*’, ‘asylum seek*’, ‘flee’, ‘asielzoeker*’, ‘vluchteling*’, vreemdeling*’ ‘amv’

Unaccompanied	‘separated’, ‘alleenstaand’, ‘niet-begeleide’
Educational	‘education*’, ‘academic’, ‘scholastic’, ‘educatief’, ‘onderwijs’
Professional	‘vocational’ or ‘work’ or ‘job’ or ‘occupation*’ or ‘career’
Aspiration*	‘dream*’, ‘wish*’, ‘goal*’, ‘ambition*’, ‘achievement*’, ‘droom’, ‘dromen’, ‘wens*’, ‘doel*’, ‘ambitie*’, ‘prestatie*’

*’ after a search term means that plurals and other forms of this word will also be included

The following combination of search terms has been used: ((unaccompanied or separated or alleenstaand or niet-begeleid)) AND (refugee* OR asylum seeker OR asylum seeking OR flee* OR forced flee* OR vluchteling* OR vreemdeling* OR asielzoeker* OR amv)) AND (education OR educational OR academic OR scholastic OR professional OR vocational OR work OR job OR occupation* OR career OR educatief OR onderwijs OR school OR werk OR baan OR banen OR carrière)) AND (aspirations OR dream OR wish OR goal or achievement OR future OR ambitions OR aspiratie OR droom OR dromen OR wens* OR doel* OR ambitie* OR prestatie)).

For the selection of articles for answering the research question, each article had to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) article concerns unaccompanied minors who have fled their country of origin or young adults who used to be unaccompanied minors who have fled their country of origin (2) article concerns the educational and professional aspirations of said unaccompanied minors (3) article is an empirical study (4) article is peer-reviewed (5) article is written in English or Dutch (6) article is published between 2000 and 2023. The choice has been made to include former unaccompanied minors in this study because there is little research available on this subject and because the ages of participants of some studies ranged from minor to young adult. The articles were scanned on abstract and title first. In a second screening the author scanned the entire article to determine if the article was suitable for this current study. In addition, the author also looked for additional articles by looking through the citelists of the selected articles.

The data search generated a total of 311 articles, ten of which were duplicates. After screening the articles on title and abstract 266 studies were excluded from the study. Studies were mostly excluded because they did not concern educational or professional aspirations. Some studies have also been excluded because the study did not concern unaccompanied minors, the study was written in German, or the study did not contain empirical data. The 25 articles left were fully screened for eligibility and the citelists were checked for additional articles. This resulted in one additional article for screening. From these 26 articles, 12 articles remained and are included in this study. Figure 1 shows the screening process in a PRISMA flow chart.

The articles have been appraised using the five appraisal prompts by Dixon-Woods et al. (2006): (1) are the aims and objectives clearly stated? (2) is the research design clearly specified and appropriate for the aims and objectives of the research? (3) do the researchers provide a clear account of the process by which the findings were produced? (4) do the researchers display enough data to support their interpretations and conclusions? (5) is the method of analysis appropriate and adequately explained? Table 2 gives an overview of the appraisal.

Figure 1.

Screening process in a PRISMA flow chart

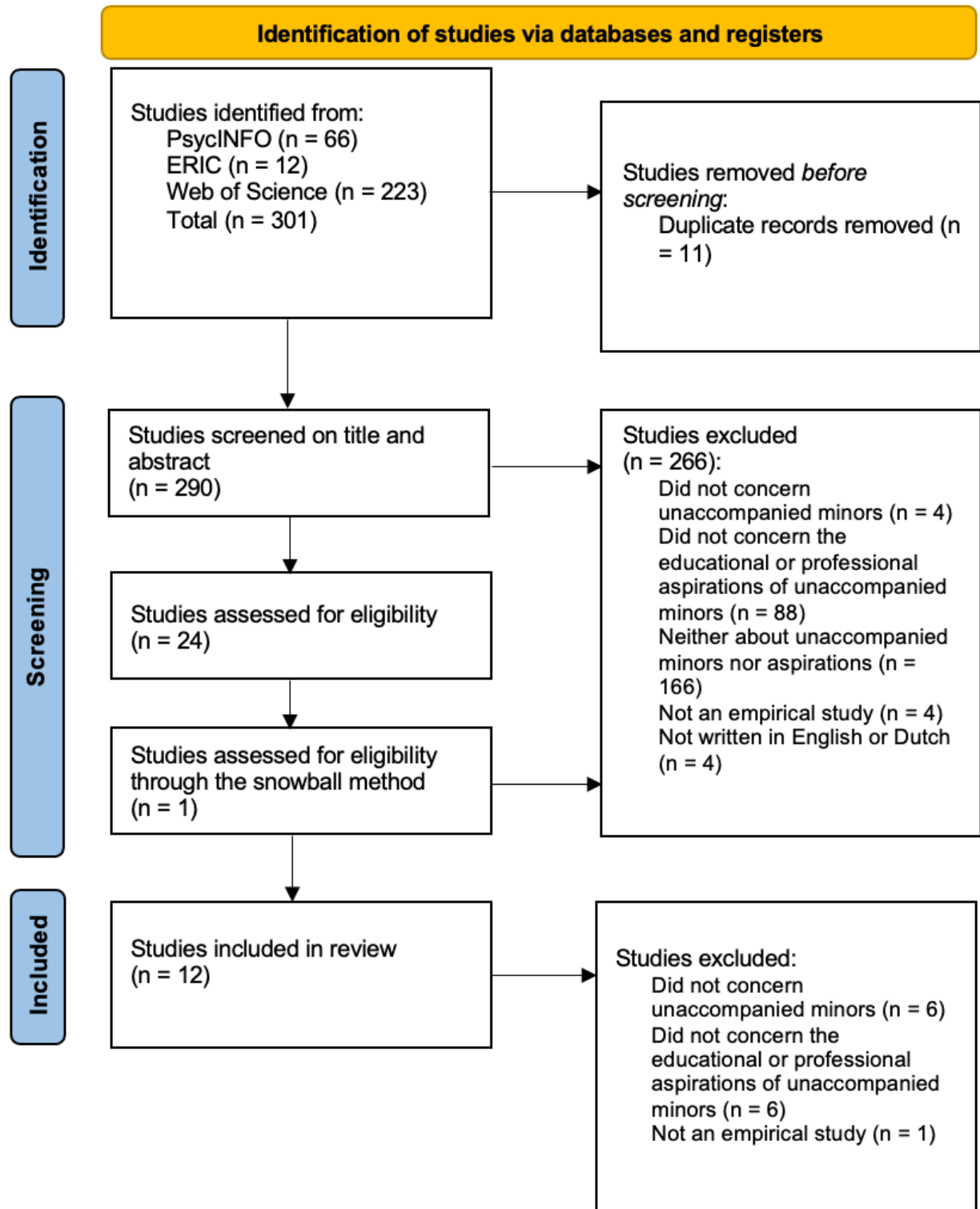


Table 2.*Dixon-Woods et al. (2006) five prompts of appraisal*

Authors, year of publication	Are the aims and objectives clearly stated?	Is the research design clearly specified and appropriate for the aims and objectives of the research?	Do the researchers provide a clear account of the process by which the findings were produced?	Do the researchers display enough data to support their interpretations and conclusions?	Is the method of analysis appropriate and adequately explained?
Frankel, K. K. et al. (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Oppedal, B. et al. (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Thommessen, S.A.O., et al. (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rana M., et al. (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Wedin, Å. (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Pastoor, L. de W. (2017)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Gladwell, C. (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Raemdonck, L., et al. (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Jahanmahan, F. & Trondman, M. (2020)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lalander, P. & Herz, M. (2021)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vervliet, M. et al. (2015)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hosseini, M. & Punzi, E. (2022)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

For the analyzation of the different articles, data relevant for the research questions has been extracted from the articles. The following data has been extracted from the articles: (1) research type (2) aim of the research (3) sample size (4) method (5) results. Table 3 gives an overview of the extracted data. The data that is interesting and relevant for answering the research questions has been coded in the program 'Atlas.ti' using the following four codes: (a) 'educational aspirations' (b) 'professional aspirations' (c) 'facilitating factors' (d) 'hindering factors'. Synthesis of the data has been done in a narrative manner.

Table 3.*Results*

Author(s), year of publication	Research type	Research aim(s)	Sample	Method	Results
Frankel, K. K. et al. (2021)	Qualitative, exploratory	To describe (1) Transnational experiences pre-, during, and post-migration that affect school-based experiences (2) experiences in US schools (3) school responses to these intersecting resources and challenges	Former unaccompanied minors, (n = 10), 18-21 years old (M = 18,5) and professionals who work with unaccompanied immigrant youth (n = 6)	Semi-structured interviews	Many of the youths experienced traumatic events which affected their US school experience. High expectations and aspirations also contributed to their school experiences.
Oppedal, B. et al. (2017)	Mixed method, exploratory	To examine factors impacting the educational aspirations and vocational identity development of youth who arrived in Norway as unaccompanied minor asylum seekers.	Former unaccompanied minors who were granted residence in Norway between 2000 and 2010 Quantative sample (n = 918), qualitative sample (n = 29), age ($\mu = 18.61$, $SD = 2.61$)	Questionnaire, semi-structured interviews	Demographic variables had no significant effects on aspirations. Traumatic experiences and mental health problems were no indicators for aspirations. Education seemed to be the number one dream/goal. Lack of age-relevant formal education seems to be a barrier for exploration of available

					educational/vocational tracks socio-cultural integration.
Thommessen, S.A.O., et al. (2015)	Qualitative, exploratory	To explore (1) the ways in which male unaccompanied youth from Afghanistan experienced arriving in Sweden (2) how they perceived support available to them (3) to give this group of refugees a voice	Former unaccompanied minors. All of the participants have experienced waiting for the outcome of their asylum application (n = 6), age 18-19	Interviews	Learning about the new society, adapting and education are important objectives for the youths. Worries and fear about family members in the country of origin caused anxiety. Experiences pre-, during and post-flight caused for a need for adult support, advice, and encouragement in the host-country.
Rana M., et al. (2011)	Qualitative, exploratory	To explore factors associated with educational resilience among unaccompanied Sudanese refugee youth who experienced extreme trauma before being placed with foster families	Former unaccompanied minors, now young adults (n = 19) who had been placed in a foster care program, age 18-26 ($\mu = 22$, $SD = 2.31$)	Open ended semi-structured interviews	All participants reported having education as their primary goal. The youth in this study were all pursuing university degrees. Personal characteristics, relationships and support were important factors for in overcoming educational challenges. Their previous educational

					experiences gave them a frame of reference, showing the opportunities they were given in the US.
Wedin, Å. (2020)	Qualitative, exploratory	To analyze relations between agency and literacy of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.	Former unaccompanied minors, now young adults (n = 5), age 18-22	Interviews	The young men think of literacy as important to reach personal goals such as study and find a job. When it comes to school demands, agency plays an important role in developing literacy skills.
Pastoor, L. de W. (2017)	Qualitative, exploratory	To explore various learning contexts outside of school for unaccompanied minors	(Former) unaccompanied minors, (n = 40), age 16-23	Semi-structured interviews	It may be suggested that awareness is raised in schools about learning opportunities in different contexts. Participation in shared activities may give more learning opportunities.
Gladwell, C. (2020)	Mixed method, exploratory	To examine which factors the socioeconomic integration and well-being of young Afghan refugees and asylum seekers who arrived in the UK as unaccompanied minors	Questionnaire among local authorities (n= 23), focus group discussions (n = 25) and interviews (n = 6) with former unaccompanied minors, age 21-24, interviews with	Questionnaire, focus group discussions, interviews.	There is a correlation between higher levels of education and improved socio-economic incomes for Afghan former unaccompanied minors. Immigration status is an important factor for

			relevant experts (n = 14)		unaccompanied minors to be able to transition into secure and settled futures. The majority of unaccompanied minors aspire to do meaningful work, to contribute to society and actively seek such work, but are prevented in ways to achieve this.
Raemdonck, L., et al. (2022)	Mixed method, exploratory, longitudinal	To explore the impact of intensive case management and specialized educational/occupational orientations services on young refugees' capabilities and agency to achieve their aspired goals	Unaccompanied minors who recently transitioned into adulthood without a parent or guardian. Longitudinal statistics (n = 81), in depth interviews (n = 24), age 17-25 (M = 19), project stakeholders (n = 10)	In depth interviews, focus group discussions, longitudinal statistics	Tensions between social workers and unaccompanied minors prevent unaccompanied minors from reaching their aspired goals
Jahanmahan, F. & Trondman, M. (2020)	Qualitative, exploratory	To explore unaccompanied minors' experiences in school in relation to their hopes for education	Unaccompanied minors (n = 15), age 15-16	Interviews	There is a strong longing for education among these boys. They desire what they themselves and their parents never had. Education had become the key for personal development, social

					relations, future life chances and active citizenship.
Lalander, P. & Herz, M. (2021)	Qualitative, longitudinal	To explore the lives of unaccompanied minors in Sweden who transition into adulthood	(Former) unaccompanied minors (n = 10), age 15-22	Interviews over the course of two years	Life plans have a strong relation to context and historical memories. Memories and relationships in the past are still experienced in present life.
Vervliet, M. et al. (2015)	Mixed method, exploratory	To investigate the aspirations of Afghan unaccompanied minors before and after departure	Unaccompanied minors (n = 52), age 13-17 ($\mu = 15.96$, $SD = 0.84$)	Self-report questionnaire, semi-structured interviews	Unaccompanied minors left their country of origin with multiple aspirations, which were not always related to the reason of fleeing. Family members played an important role in this. Some aspirations are not necessarily linked to them being a refugee, but are related to their age, gender or familial role. Aspirations of unaccompanied minors are complex and dynamic
Hosseini, M. & Punzi, E. (2022)	Qualitative, exploratory	To gain knowledge about unaccompanied Afghan girls experienced	Former unaccompanied minors, now young	Open question interviews	Unaccompanied refugee girls are in a very vulnerable position, yet very capable to change

integration and their
everyday lives'

adults (n = 6), 19-24
years old

their lives. They
perceive education as
very important for
personal growth and
integration

Results

Methodological Qualities

Table 2 gives an overview of the data extracted from the 12 articles. Sample sizes of qualitative studies ranged from 5 to 40 (Mdn = 10) and the sample sizes of mixed methods studies ranged from 52 to 918 (Mdn = 81). Most participants originated from Afghanistan and a fair number of participants originated from Somalia, Guatemala, and Iraq. Other countries unaccompanied minors came from are Sudan, Iran, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Syria, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Chechnya, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Mauritania, and Pakistan. The host countries for the studies were United States of America, Norway, Belgium, United Kingdom, and most commonly Sweden. The participants of the studies were predominantly male. Out of the 12 studies 4 had an all-male sample, one study had an all-female sample, and the other studies had a mostly male sample with often just 1-2 female participants. The reason for these skewed samples has in all probability to do with cultural reasons and because there are more male unaccompanied minors than there are female. From the 12 articles 8 are qualitative research, from which one is a longitudinal research. The other 4 articles have a mixed method design from which one was also a longitudinal research. From the 12 articles there were 4 which also included other adults such as professionals and local authorities. Data concerning these adults is not included in this review. All the participants of the studies are or have been unaccompanied minors and have experienced living in the host country as unaccompanied minors.

Educational Aspirations

Education as a High Priority

For many unaccompanied minors' safety and settling into the new host country was first and foremost the priority, followed by education. Unaccompanied minors' who first arrive

into the new host country were concerned with obtaining documents, being granted status, and securing their families and their own safety first (Gladwell, 2020; Rana et al., 2011; Thomessen et al., 2015 v.). Seeking safety is often the first trigger to flee from their country of origin (Vervliet et al. 2015; v.).

All studies showed that the unaccompanied minors' regarded education as very important and of high priority. For some unaccompanied minors it was one of the triggers to flee their country of origin (Vervliet et al., 2015). Education being a high priority goes hand in hand with high educational aspirations. According to the research of Vervliet et al. (2015) most of the unaccompanied minors had already high educational and professional aspirations before fleeing to their country of origin and these became even higher after arrival. The Aspirations Scale for Refugees and Migrants (ASRM) shows whether unaccompanied minors have a certain aspiration and at what intensity this aspiration is experienced. The ASRM showed that 88.5% of the sample (n = 52) had 'study' as their aspiration, with an average intensity of 1.67 (SD = 0.68) before arrival and 1.89 (SD = 0.31) after arrival, making it the aspiration with the highest intensity after arrival. Other aspirations were 'obtain a diploma' which 80.8% of the unaccompanied minors had as an aspiration with an average intensity of 1.61 (SD = 0.73) before arrival and 84.6% of unaccompanied minors had this aspiration with an average intensity of 1.85 (SD = 0.47) after arrival. Of the unaccompanied minors 71.2% of the unaccompanied minors wanted to 'Find a good job' with an average intensity of 1.27 (SD = 0.89) before arrival and 78.8% wanted to find a good job with an average intensity of 1.59 (SD = 0.69). Similar results were found by Raemdonck et al. (2022), who measured aspirations of unaccompanied refugee youth (n = 81) before and after participation in a social support program using the ASRM. Aspirations for studying, obtaining a diploma, and finding a good job were high before the program; the intensity decreased after the program but remained relatively high.

New opportunities

Many unaccompanied minors are presented with opportunities in the host country that they previously did not receive in the country of origin (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022; Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Rana et al., 2011). When given these new opportunities, such as receiving a formal education, the unaccompanied minors do not want to let go of these chances. They wish to change their lives through education. One unaccompanied minor spoke about how his parents had never gotten the opportunity to go to school and subsequently always had to work very hard (Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020). His parents lack of opportunities and education sparked motivation to achieve an education for himself.

Different Studies and Tracks

The unaccompanied minors spoke about different educational aspirations. In all studies there were unaccompanied minors who aspired to attend college or university, one unaccompanied minor proudly spoke about his peers (also unaccompanied minors) enrolling into specific highly regarded colleges namely Harvard and Stanford (Rana et al. (2011)). One unaccompanied minor intends on obtaining a doctorate (Frankel et al., 2021). Oppedal et al. (2017) shows that the educational aspirations of unaccompanied minors were evenly distributed among the different categories: undecided, upper secondary vocational track, upper secondary theoretical track, undergraduate university degree and graduate university degree. Some unaccompanied minors had not decided about their education yet (22.3%) (n = 918). Upper secondary vocational tracks were picked more often by unaccompanied minors (25.7%) than upper secondary theoretical tracks or university-preparing tracks (4.2%). However, 26.1% of the unaccompanied minors wanted to obtain an undergraduate university degree and 21.6% of unaccompanied minors aimed at a graduate university degree.

Unaccompanied minors doing or wanting to do a vocational upper secondary track showed interest in health and social sciences, data engineering, accounting, process technique, electronics, engineering, plumbing and construction (Oppedal et al., 2017; Raemdonck et al., 2022). Unaccompanied minors aiming for a university degree were aspiring an education in history, mathematics, political sciences, medicine, law, engineering, and social sciences (Oppedal et al., 2017; Pastoor, 2017; Wedin, 2020).

Achieving educational aspirations

Unaccompanied minors not only talk about their high educational aspirations, but they are also proactive in managing to achieve their goals and dreams. They study, do their homework, ask for help, learn the native language, and partake in extracurricular activities (Frankel et al., 2021; Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Pastoor, 2017; Wedin, 2020.). For instance, one unaccompanied minor had decided to repeat one year in upper secondary school to achieve better grades in pursuit of a university degree (Wedin, 2020).

Professional Aspirations

Sequences

Most unaccompanied minors talk in sequences or life plans when they speak about their aspirations, where one aspiration cannot be fulfilled without first achieving another aspiration (Frankel et al., 2021; Gladwell, 2020; Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Lalander & Herz, 2021; Oppedal et al., 2017; Raemdonck et al., 2022; Thomessen et al., 2015; Vervliet et al., 2015). Educational or professional aspirations are often part of a bigger picture that they would like to achieve. They want to obtain their high school or upper secondary diploma, then they want to study and obtain a college or university degree. Next, they talk about getting a job, having a steady income, buy a home, being able to support themselves independently or starting a family. For example, one unaccompanied minor had a very clear life plan prior to fleeing to

the host country. This unaccompanied minor firstly wanted to learn Swedish and pass junior high school. After that he wanted to qualify for secondary high school, then study at a university and finally get a job and have a steady income. Some unaccompanied minors talk about wanting to study again after having worked for some time. One unaccompanied minor spoke about being a certified electrician, working for some time and then going back to university to become an engineer (Oppedal et al., 2017).

Achieving professional aspirations

Unaccompanied minors seem to make calculated decisions about their education to achieve their professional aspirations. This can be seen in the behaviors of some unaccompanied minors. One unaccompanied minor was interested in politics before fleeing his country of origin and took an interest in politics in the host country Sweden as well. He partook into several different extracurricular activities related to politics and actively sought to improve his language skills to further engage in politics (Wedin, 2020). Another unaccompanied minor who also had an interest in politics acted the same by joining the organization Save the Children and the Labour party's youth organization, because he wanted to learn more about politics (Pastoor, 2017).

Different Professions

Unaccompanied minors showed an interest in different professions such as police officer, cardiologist, lawyer, social worker, doctor, business owner, nurse, engineer, electrician, construction worker, politician, dentist, and women's rights activist. Some unaccompanied minors had not yet decided on a specific profession, but did choose a general direction for a job, such as a job in which the person could help or contribute to their home country; a job in which the person could help or contribute to the host country; a job working with children, working with people, helping people, working for a charity, work in the public

sector, improve the lives of women or work in music (v. Frankel et al., 2021; Gladwell, 2020; Hosseini & Punzi, 2022; Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Oppedal et al., 2017; Pastoor, 2017; Thomessen et al., 2015; Wedin, 2020).

To Help in the Country of Origin or in the New Host Country. Unaccompanied minors talked about wanting to be able to help in their home country (Gladwell, 2020; Oppedal et al., 2017; Rana et al., 2011). One unaccompanied minor talked about wanting to be a nurse, because there was a need for nurses back home (Oppedal et al., 2017). Two other unaccompanied minors talked about playing an active part in politics in the new host country (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022; Jahanmahan & Trondman 2020). One young woman talked about helping other women, teaching about their lives and advocating for women's rights (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022). Some unaccompanied minors are already actively helping in their country of origin. An unaccompanied together with his friends had organized the building of a well in his village (Oppedal et al., 2017). He wants to be an electrician in the future, because they need electricians in his village.

Be an Active Participant of Society. Many unaccompanied minors spoke about being an active part of society and integrating in the new society (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022; Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Pastoor, 2017; Thomessen et al., 2015). They felt it was of importance to receive a formal education in order to be able to participate. Education is not just seen as a means to have an occupation, but also as a doorway to personal growth, to be more well-rounded and to think independently. For unaccompanied girls specifically, education means being able to make decisions for themselves and to escape oppression (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022).

Helping people. Many unaccompanied minors talked about wanting to be able to help people (Frankel et al., 2021; Hosseini & Punzi, 2022; Oppedal et al., 2017; Pastoor, 2017; Raemdonck et al., 2022). They wish to help people in the same way they wanted to be helped

when they needed it the most and they wish to do this through their profession. Some unaccompanied minors talked about wanting to become a nurse, be a social worker and an electrician to be able to help other people. One unaccompanied minor specifically talked about wanting to be able to take care of their parents when they are older. In some of the unaccompanied minors' home countries there is no care system in which they cater to sick and old people (Lalander & Herz, 2021)

Facilitating and Hindering Factors

Although unaccompanied minors do have high educational and professional aspirations, not all unaccompanied minors are able to achieve these aspirations and have to settle for an educational program or occupation that they did not prefer (Frankel et al., Gladwell, 2020; 2021, Lalander & Herz, 2021; Oppedal et al., 2017; Pastoor 2017; Raemdonck et al., 2022; Rana et al., 2011; Wedin, 2020). Facilitating factors that help unaccompanied minors achieve their aspirations and hindering factors that prevent unaccompanied minors from achieving their aspirations have been identified.

Facilitating factors

Good Teachers. Several unaccompanied minors experienced great benefits from having good teachers (Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Rana et al., 2011). Good teachers makes that unaccompanied minors are more interested in their education. They patiently explain the subject matter when a student does not understand, they believe in them, encourage them and boost their confidence and motivation. The unaccompanied minors in the UK study of Gladwell (2020) talk about how good teachers have helped them in the progress of achieving their educational goals. They provided them with extra help and additional English lessons which were perceived as particularly helpful.

Learning the Native Language. Unaccompanied minors experienced it was helpful for them to achieve their educational goals when they felt they had gotten a better grasp on the native language of the host country (Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Gladwell 2020). Facilities for unaccompanied minors that aid them in learning the new language greatly helps them achieving their educational goals. This could be teachers, extra lessons or a multilingual classroom assistant. One of the unaccompanied minors spoke about how it was important to learn to speak the native language well, because it gives teachers the opportunity to focus on teaching you other subjects (Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020).

Fitting in. For two unaccompanied minors wanting to fit in indirectly helped them achieve their educational and professional goals. One of them talked about how he did not want his classmates to know that he is an unaccompanied minor (Lalander & Herz, 2021). He wants to be treated like an equal. He does not want his peers to assume that he is someone with a lot of troubles or to be regarded as strange. By performing well in school, he fits in with his classmates. Another unaccompanied minor spoke about wanting to be like everybody else (Lalander & Herz, 2021). Having an education and a job played a big role in this.

Role Models. Having role models to look up to or examples of other refugees with the same ethnic or cultural background performing well in society can be greatly motivational for unaccompanied minors. Two unaccompanied minors wanted to step into the footsteps of their parents they wanted to become a dentist like their father and a nurse like their mother (Lalander & Herz, 2021). A study done in the UK by Gladwell (2020) found that unaccompanied minors who lived in the South East and especially in London were more likely to want to further their education than unaccompanied minors who lived elsewhere. The suggestion is that unaccompanied minors who live in these places have more Afghan role models who have attended university and have secured highly regarded careers.

Supporting Social Network. Having the support of teachers, social workers and friends made it easier for unaccompanied minors to figure out what they wanted to achieve in their lives (Oppedal et al., 2017; Rana et al., 2011; Thomessen et al., 2015). One unaccompanied minor contemplated between two different vocational tracks and decided to choose the same track as his friend (Oppedal et al., 2017). They had known each other for a long time and talked a lot about what to decide. Having the support of his friend helped him in the decision. Another unaccompanied minor spoke about how the opinion of adults were important to him, because adults have more life experience (Oppedal et al., 2017). He especially appreciated the support of teachers and school counselors because they can explain about the different educational trajectories and how the education system works. One unaccompanied minor spoke about how his mentor took a very caring and supportive role. He spoke about how it is important that someone encourages you to go to school and to learn for the sake of learning, to make something of yourself and not just go to school because you are required to (Thomessen et al., 2015).

Being aware of one's rights and opportunities. The host country and the country of origin are often culturally very different. When the unaccompanied minor girls came to realize how different of a country Sweden was, they realized the kind of opportunities they have in this country. Women's rights are very different in Sweden than in Afghanistan. In Sweden you are not dependent on a man or marriage to be safe. You can make your own decisions. Which gives the young girls new opportunities to study and have a career. Its' important that girls are made aware of these rights (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022).

Personal attributes. Despite having challenges with educational aspirations of professional aspirations, many unaccompanied minors do persevere, showing a lot of motivation, resourcefulness, and determination (Rana et al., 2011; Oppedal et al., 2017; Pastoor, 2017; Raemdonck et al., 2022). Some unaccompanied minors might not have been

able to choose the educational track they wanted right now. But they still push through and some even plan on continuing their education after they have gotten a job. One unaccompanied minor really wanted to become a nurse but was told it would be too difficult because of language barriers. This person is now studying plumbing, but still plans on studying to become a nurse after working for a while (Raemdonck et al., 2022). Another unaccompanied minor talked about how his study was difficult, he had failed some classes, but he repeated them and then he passed. A third unaccompanied benefitted from keeping a positive mindset when confronted with challenges in life (Oppedal et al., 2017). In his experience life is difficult when you have negative thoughts.

Education and Labor Market Orientation Services. Unaccompanied minors responded positively to these orientation services (Raemdonck et al., 2022). They helped them in their abilities to be more autonomous and were helpful in achieving their aspirations. Most found especially the practical help useful of learning to write a CV and practicing job interviews.

Hindering factors

Financial struggles. Having to send money to family in the home country can hinder the pursuit of educational or professional aspirations and seemed to be the biggest hindering factor (Frankel et al., Gladwell, 2020; 2021, Lalander & Herz, 2021; Oppedal et al., 2017; Pastoor 2017; Wedin, 2020). Several financial acts can hinder unaccompanied minors such as trying to bring family members to the host country, sending money back home and paying bills. Family members are often dependent on the money the child sends and cannot help the child with financial struggles. This can cause the child to worry about getting a job fast (Frankel et al., 2021). Unaccompanied minors who carry such financial burdens are not able to focus completely on school or to choose an educational track they prefer. They either choose shorter or easier vocational tracks so that they can get a job fast or so that they can work besides school

(Oppedal et al., 2017). Some do not study at all and get a fulltime job for which a diploma is not necessary because the need for money is that high; even if means getting a job they do not like or having to work seven days a week (Lalander & Herz, 2021; Oppedal et al., 2017). One unaccompanied minor considered doing an illegal act of work, delivering drugs, as a way of earning a lot of money quickly (Oppedal et al., 2017).

Mental Health. One mixed-method study showed how neither traumatic experiences nor mental health issues had significant effects on forming educational aspirations in multivariate analyses (Oppedal et al., 2017). However, excerpts from interviews from this same study and other qualitative studies show that mental health issues can be detrimental for some unaccompanied minors when trying to achieve their educational or professional aspirations (Frankel et al., 2021; Gladwell, 2020; Lalander & Herz, 2021). One unaccompanied minor from suffered from depression because she missed her mother so much (Lalander & Herz, 2021). She had attempted to find her mother again, but without success. She left her foster family and went to live on her own in a small city, trying to find her mother, but again with no luck. She became lonely and depressed by her failed attempts and without her foster family, who she had lost affection for, because they did not help her find her biological mother. She became so depressed it affected her life, and her school grades. She did not attend school for two whole months and her grades were not high enough to become a nurse, a goal she had been working towards. This shows how important social support, and a sense of stability is.

Another unaccompanied minor spoke about not receiving adequate help or support when he was dealing with mental health issues. He felt that he was not able to plan for his future because of his mental health problems. He told about how he did not have parents he could ask for help and that the social workers and counselors couldn't give him the help he needed (Oppedal et al., 2017). Another unaccompanied minor who suffered from PTSD had only gotten back to his vocational track in upper secondary school after nine years (Oppedal et

al., 2017). The symptoms from PTSD prevented him from forming any educational or professional aspirations. Another study (Gladwell, 2020) talks about how unaccompanied minors experienced too much stress and anxiety, hindering them in pursuing their educational aspirations. One unaccompanied minor spoke about not wanting to go to school anymore (Frankel et al., 2021). She did like to study but found it to be too stressful whilst also working. When unaccompanied minors have to work too much it can be reason for them to stop studying or drop out of school.

Poor Advice. Some unaccompanied minors spoke about receiving bad advice from teachers, social workers or councilors. Mostly because they do not speak the native language well enough, or because their competencies are judged lowly. One unaccompanied minor chose an education in process technique, even though he was more interested in history (Oppedal et al., 2017). His teacher however assumed that he would struggle too much in university because he thought it would be too difficult for him since he did not master the native language yet. Another unaccompanied minor was given similar advice. He talked about being really motivated to become a nurse. However, his social worker told him it would be better to choose a different education because he did not speak the native language well enough, the study would be too difficult for him (Raemdonck et al., 2022). Another unaccompanied minor had asked about information about enrolling into schools. The counselor did not know, so he had to look it up himself and found more information online than he had gotten from school and the counselor (Oppedal et al., 2017).

Language Barriers. Not speaking the native language. One unaccompanied minor spoke about how he wanted to study before he had fled. Now he does not want to study anymore, because it would be too difficult and take too long to study since he did not speak the native language well. It would be easier to just a get a job. Different unaccompanied minors

responded that language barriers were hindering their educational or professional pursuits (Raemdonck et al., 2022).

Realistic Weighing of Opportunities Based on Contextual Factors. One unaccompanied minor talked about an interest in mathematics or being a politician. However, he felt that an education or work in these fields were not realistic for him, given his circumstances (Oppedal et al., 2017). Considering trauma, lack of schooling, lack of social networks, having commitments to family members in the home country, language barriers and discrimination, he felt that it would be hard for him to be a politician in Sweden. He also felt it would be difficult to get a job with a mathematics degree, so he thought engineering would be a better option.

Discrimination. One unaccompanied minor spoke about having to choose a theoretical track instead of the vocational track he wanted because he could not get an apprenticeship due to discrimination (Oppedal et al., 2017). He went door to door to many different companies, but always got turned down for some reason. Being discriminated against ultimately prevented him from doing the educational track he desired.

Having Children. Having children. Some former unaccompanied minors got pregnant or had children of their own to take care of. One former unaccompanied minor got expelled from her private Christian college because she got pregnant. Some boys had to stop their education because they had to pay child support. (Rana et al., 2011).

Conclusion

The aim of this research was to provide an overview of educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors and which factors hinder or help realize these aspirations. The research questions were: (1) What are the educational and professional aspirations of

unaccompanied minors who flee their country of origin? (2) Which barriers and facilitators hinder or help realize the educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors?

The studies included in this research show that unaccompanied minors have a great many different aspirations. When it comes to education, unaccompanied minors aspire to attend upper secondary and university or college. Preferred upper secondary tracks are health and social sciences, data engineering, accounting, process technique, electronics, engineering, plumbing and construction. Preferred studies are history, mathematics, political sciences, law, medicine, engineering, and social sciences. When it comes to profession, many different jobs are mentioned: police officer, cardiologist, lawyer, social worker, doctor, business owner, nurse, engineer, electrician, construction worker, politician, dentist, and women's rights activist. Unaccompanied minors also showed professional aspirations in a broader sense such as: giving back to the host country, helping in the country of origin, to be an active participant of society, helping people, working with children or people, working for charity, working for the public sector, improve the lives of women and making music.

Overall unaccompanied minors have high ambitions and aim to achieve high educational goals, often mentioning college or university as their final and highest educational aspiration. Unaccompanied minors are interested in a variety of different educational programs, tracks, and studies. The educational aspirations of unaccompanied minors were in most cases linked to their professional aspirations. They want to obtain a certain degree because they want to obtain a specific job. Having a good job subsequently was often linked to a bigger life plan. Being able to help other people or to contribute to society with their profession was important in the decision for many unaccompanied minors. Unaccompanied minors proactively worked towards achieving their goals by doing their homework, taking extra language lessons, participating in extracurricular activities and ask teachers for help.

The biggest hindering factor and the factor most often mentioned by unaccompanied minors was financial troubles. Unaccompanied minors either did not have the financial resources to fund their educational aspirations on their own, or had to stop their education or pick a different course than they might have wanted to have time left for a job and send money home. Other hindering factors are: mental health issues, poor advice, language barriers, realistic weighing of opportunities, discrimination and having children. When looking at the hindering factors, some of these factors seem to be overlapping or seem connected. Worrying about money caused a lot of stress and anxiety for some unaccompanied minors, thus affecting their mental health. Other hindering factors are connected as well. Some unaccompanied minors felt held back in achieving their aspirations because of the poor advice some adults had given them. This advice mainly concerned the language skills of unaccompanied minors.

Although some unaccompanied minors had to pick different educational and occupational courses because of these hindering factors, others still held on to their goals. Facilitating factors for achieving aspirations are: good teachers, being able to learn the native language, fitting in, having role models, having a supporting social network, being aware of one's rights and opportunities, personal attributes, and education and labor orientation services. Some unaccompanied minors plan to study again after being employed for a while, others take extra lessons or redo a year of school to be able to go to university. This shows that even though unaccompanied minors face many challenges, they have great perseverance and motivation.

Discussion

There are several strengths and weaknesses about this systematic review. One of the strengths of this research is that the studies included concerned unaccompanied minors with many different ethnicities who have settled in different western host countries. This means that the current research can, to an extent, be generalized to western countries. The samples of the studies included represent the population well since most unaccompanied minors are male.

Another positive point of the samples was the age range. Ages of participants ranged from 15 to 26 years old. Experiences of unaccompanied minors in the process of settling in the host country have been included as well as experiences of unaccompanied minors over a longer time period. When searching for suitable studies a snowballing approach has been used to find more relevant articles for this current systematic review. Although no studies have been added after searching the citelists, this did make the data search thorough. Another strength of this research is that the checklist of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses by PRISMA (Page et al., 2021) has been used throughout the entire process of this research. And finally, this research has been able to deliver an overview of the educational and professional aspirations of unaccompanied minors and the factors that either hinder or help realize these aspirations; adding to the scientific literature.

One of the limits of this research is that only one author was available. This means that during the process of selecting articles and extracting data there was a risk of bias. The author has been aware of this and has tried to be careful in the selection process, however a risk of bias still exists. This could be harmful for the reliability of this research.

For follow-up research it could be interesting to first of all continue researching aspirations of unaccompanied minors, although this research has given an overview, the available research is scarce. A mixed method approach may be the most suitable way of researching this population, considering most of the existing literature is qualitative research. It is also of importance when researching unaccompanied girls and young women to consider that gender roles play an important part in their experiences as unaccompanied minors. One literature research with 9 studies has found that female unaccompanied refugee minors are more often affected by mental health problems such as depression and PTSD than their male counterparts (Mohwinkel et al., 2018). It would be very interesting to learn more about unaccompanied minors experiences as girls and young women considering they may

have very different experiences when it comes to educational and professional aspirations due to cultural aspects. Most of the unaccompanied minors originate from non-western countries where according to western standards, gender-equality is not always prevalent (Hosseini & Punzi, 2022; Rana et al., 2011). In further research, interview questions could be included asking specifically about their experiences as girls and young women.

Practical advice for governments is to aid unaccompanied minors more in their financial struggles and mental health problems, and for schools to provide more services for unaccompanied minors to become proficient in the native language of the host country. By taking away more of the financial burdens unaccompanied minors experience they will not be forced anymore to drop out of school or choose an educational course that they do not want. It is a fact that unaccompanied minors have as much right to an education as any other child as is stated in The International Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN, 1989). The countries that have ratified the Convention could therefore be more proactive in ensuring that every child can obtain an education. Another service that would be beneficial for unaccompanied minors would be help concerning their mental health. This could be done in several ways. Oppedal and Thormod (2015) conclude that it is of high importance that unaccompanied minors receive adequate help with locating lost family members. Distress concerning the safety of family members can be detrimental for unaccompanied minors' mental health, as was the case of one unaccompanied minor who had lost her mother, became depressed and lost sight of her aspiration to become a nurse (Lalander & Herz, 2021). Another way to help unaccompanied minors with their mental health problems is for local authorities to organize interventions in which unaccompanied minors get to participate with a group of culturally diverse peers, since the support of a social network has shown to be highly beneficial for unaccompanied minors' mental health (Höhne et al., 2020 ; Oppedal & Thormod, 2015). It would be greatly helpful for unaccompanied minors if schools are able to provide extra language lessons and bilingual or

multilingual classroom assistants. Unaccompanied minors who did get to benefit from such services spoke highly positive about how these services had helped them achieve their goals (Jahanmahan & Trondman, 2020; Gladwell 2020). Contrary, unaccompanied minors who were not able to choose the study of their preference, often mentioned language barriers as the problem (Raemdonck et al., 2022).

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