‘This is my life’:
Youth negotiating legality and belonging in Toronto

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Abstract
This paper presents insights from six youth ages 12-18 living with precarious status in Toronto with their families. The varied immigration status of the participants highlighted the multiple ways in which an individual can be living with precarious status in Canada, in the sense of experiencing limitations to both their access to services and their agency. Some of the youth lacked awareness of the extent to which their status mediated their experiences, which in some cases resulted from their parents protecting them from knowledge of the family’s situation. Despite the uncertainty of their status, the youth were able to develop and sustain a network of support persons both within and outside of Canada. In addition, their participation in the academic and social aspects of school was a significant element in their lives particularly in terms of feeling a sense of belonging. The project raises important questions for further research regarding families’ communication strategies around immigration status and how youth understand and confront their status, as well as to what extent the education system understands the challenges faced by youth living with precarious status.
(183 words)
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“When I think about it, like I’m not going to be like, oh it’s not my problem, obviously, because it’s my family. But the thing is, it’s not like I had a choice in what was happening because the thing is I was born into it so it’s like I’ve had this with me since [pause] forever. Like, ever since I existed so besides that like. This is my life, so I’ve gotta cope with whatever.”

(Ibrahim)

Introduction

The migration process reverberates through various spaces and relationships of daily life. Precarious legal status in particular must be negotiated in relation to people and contexts in a range of interactions from health clinics, to recreation programs, to schools. Based on extensive, longitudinal research they have carried out in the United States with children of immigrant families, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) argue that the “legal status of an immigrant child influences – perhaps more so than national origins and socio-economic background of the parents – his or her experiences and life chances” (p. 33). I wanted to examine this finding in the Canadian context in order to understand the relevance of the migration process to the experiences of youth living in this country.

In the summer of 2005, I carried out a small-scale, qualitative study with six youth living with precarious immigration status in Toronto. Even among this very small group of youth, their immigration status ranged from holding a temporary student visa to having a deportation order; their situations and experiences of precarious status varied. For these youth, age and immigration trajectory – including their status on entry and changes to their status over time – were key elements that affected their experiences of living with precarious status with impacts on their ability to access services and their sense of belonging. In different ways and at different times, their status shifted the
meaning of particular spaces. The school and the home were key locations where the youth negotiated their status and struggled to belong.

Two key insights emerge from the youths’ narratives and they relate to these key spaces. School was an important place of belonging, but it was complicated by their precarious status: at times their status was not relevant, while at others it was starkly highlighted. Moreover, the youth expressed trust in school authorities but also indicated that school officials were not aware of their status. Family dynamics were also affected as the youth negotiated their precarious status. Parents tried to shelter children when they were younger from awareness of their situation. The youth learned about their status in crucial moments as their immigration cases progressed, with one child finding out as their case came before the refugee tribunal and another child learning only once her family had been issued a deportation order. The project raises important questions for further research regarding families’ communication strategies around immigration status and how youth understand their status, as well as to what extent people in the Canadian education system understand the challenges faced by youth living with precarious status.

Contextualizing immigration status in Canada

Goldring, Berinstein, and Bernhard (2009) argue that the legal framework of the Canadian immigration system sanctions a gradation of rights and entitlements on the basis of immigration status, and suggest there are various ways in which individuals can be living with what they term “precarious status.” There are many ways for individuals and families to live in Canada without being seen as full members and without the ability to fully participate and access services and programs. Of particular relevance to this
investigation is the complex determination system through which inland refugee
claimants must navigate. The process is fraught with uncertainty since the outcome of a
claim is not guaranteed and the determination of status process can take several years
(Bernhard et al. 2005; Goldring et al. 2009; Montgomery 2002; Omidvar and Richmond
2003; Yau 1995). This “status-in-waiting” creates barriers in accessing services and
resources and can lead to precarious living conditions for parents and children (Brouwer
1998; Lowry and Nyers 2003; Montgomery 2002; Omidvar and Richmond 2003; Yau
1995). Beyond the emotional and social burdens of uncertain immigration status, there
are significant financial costs. In many cases, the requirements to produce ‘satisfactory’
identification documents, submit to a background check, and pay the landing fees become
prohibitive (Brouwer 1998; Canadian Council for Refugees 2004). Moreover, the
lengthy refugee determination process has contributed to what Brouwer (1998) calls “a
new underclass of people without status” (p. 3). The six youth who took part in this
study were living with different kinds of status and experienced limitations in a variety of
ways that differed by age and immigration trajectory.

Legal status is worked out in an ongoing fashion in the everyday spaces and
relationships that people negotiate. Key among these for the youth were the spaces of the
school and the family. In both spaces, ‘the state’ intervenes and influences its character;
the state and its borders are never far away. In speaking of the space of the state, I refer
not only to the legal framework through which immigration status is determined, but also
to the individuals who implement it at border crossings, immigration offices, hospitals,
and schools. Discourses on legality and belonging are diffused throughout the social
body, meaning that legal status must constantly be negotiated in ‘official’ and ‘ unofficial’
interactions. People living with precarious status are thus constantly confronted with their status through the practices of individuals acting for and interpreting the state in a variety of spaces (Mountz 2003; Sharma 2006). The youth were asked – at times explicitly – to define and defend themselves in relation to the state through their interactions with various institutions and individuals.

People living with precarious status in Canada are legitimately fearful of the state and its potential intrusions into their lives and livelihoods. Not only are there restrictions on their ability to access services and programs but there is also unwillingness to access them, amounting to “a geography of avoidance of state apparatus” (Desforges et al. 2005, p. 442). Fear of exposing their status to authorities may prevent people from seeking police or medical attention, even in abusive or emergency situations (Access Alliance Multicultural Community Health Centre 2005; Bannerman et al. 2003; Committee for Accessible AIDS Treatment 2001; San Martin 2004). Several researchers have documented poor healthcare access and outcomes, finding in particular that individuals with precarious status hesitate to seek medical attention until emergency or acute care is required rather than benefiting from health promotion and prevention services (AAMCHC 2005; Bannerman et al. 2001; CAAT 2001). This is problematic from both a moral and a public health standpoint and is a connection that policymakers cannot afford to ignore.

The legal status of a parent influences children’s rights and outcomes regardless of their status – even children who have citizenship by birth (Bernhard et al. 2007; Fix and Zimmermann 1999). Parents may be hesitant to register them with authorities: some children do not have identification (e.g. birth certificates) that proves their status; other
parents may not enrol their children in school or participate in their education due to their status (Bernhard et al. 2005; Bernhard and Freire 1997; Yau 1995). The migration process also presents challenges to family dynamics and authority structures (Bernhard et al. 2005; Kilbride et al. 2000; Tyyska 2001). It is often necessary for financial or other reasons for families to relocate after their initial migration, making it difficult for parents to establish meaningful connections in the early stages of their settlement process; moreover, parents often have less time to spend with children due to the need to support the family’s survival, which may entail working multiple jobs, traveling around the city to access services, and dealing with the family’s immigration process (Bernhard and Freire 1997; Fantino and Colak 2001; Yau 1995).

Immigrant and refugee children face many losses associated with the migration process, including loss of extended family, friends, community, and familiarity with institutions, as well as a range of issues throughout the settlement process, including potential language barriers, possible tension with their parents, uncertain financial situations, social isolation, and alienation (Fantino and Colak 2001; Kilbride et al. 2000; Omidvar and Richmond 2003). Fantino and Colak (2001) suggest that perhaps the “greatest threat to these children is not the stress of belonging to two cultures but the stress of belonging to none.” While most immigrants can at least envision the possibility of returning to their country of emigration, most refugees cannot (Fantino and Colak 2001). Refugee children have often experienced war firsthand and may exhibit anxiety and stress related to this trauma; often their parents are not in a position to offer support as they may be struggling through their own trauma (Bernhard and Freire 1997; Fantino and Colak 2001; Kilbride et al. 2000; Yau 1995). In addition, refugee children may have
had little or no prior formal schooling, experienced interruptions to their schooling, or entered school in the midst of the academic year (Kilbride et al. 2000; Yau 1995).

An important site of inclusion for children, and indeed for families, is the education system. Unfortunately school can also be exclusionary when some children are not allowed in, and even if they are permitted to enter, their knowledge and experiences may be questioned, disrespected, and ignored (Bernhard et al. 1995; Gonzalez and Moll 2002). School is a location where children experience varying degrees of belonging that is mediated by race, class, gender, and other factors (Bernhard and Freire 1997; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). Children often have deeper and more sustained contact with societal institutions, particularly the education system, so they tend to develop cultural and linguistic competence faster than their parents (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001; Tyyska 2001). This may place them in a position of acting as cultural mediators on behalf of their families and at the same time it gives children more responsibility and power in the relationship. The youths’ narratives underscore the complex ways in which legal status influences their experiences of belonging. How do youth living with precarious status negotiate belonging? In what ways do people and contexts mediate their experiences?

Methods

This research project examines the situations of six youth ages 12 to 18 living with precarious status in Toronto with their families. This age range was selected in order to consider a range of issues faced by youth at various stages of their interactions with the education system. I anticipated that youth of different ages would face different
challenges. In addition to age differences, the youth involved in the study were also living with different kinds of immigration status (outlined in detail below). This diversity of experiences reveals multiple ways and places in which youth struggle to belong as they negotiate their status. I carried out individual interviews in English with the six youth who agreed to participate; their parents had also given informed consent as the youth were all under age 18. The interviews took place in an informal atmosphere, in a location suggested by the youth in order that they felt comfortable and safe. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions in order to address ideas that arose in the youths’ stories.

I anticipated that it would be difficult to find youth willing to participate in the project given their status. In order to protect the confidentiality of potential participants, I did not know the youth’s names or contact information and instead relied on the assistance of service providers to make youth aware of the project and then on the initiative of the youth to contact me to express interest in participating.ii As a result I was reliant on community-based researchers, service providers, and activists who were in contact with youth living with precarious status. For several months, I met with people from various organizations including settlement agencies, youth programs, legal aid clinics, churches, and community development agencies. I hoped that my familiarity with these individuals and organizations would help to establish trust with the youth who also have a relationship with them.

Several service providers demonstrated their willingness to help recruit potential participants, despite their limited resources and time, but expressed concern that the structure of the process would be a deterrent to finding participants in that the youth
would have to get in touch with me to participate. As a result, the recruiting process was only successful to the extent that service providers were willing and able to take the time from their full schedules to play more of a proactive role in making youth aware of the project and helping to set up meetings on my behalf. It is possible that the dedication shown by service providers helped the youth to feel confidence in the process. The youth who participated were all referred through individuals who spoke their first language and/or shared their ethno-racial background; these individuals were able to speak to the youth and parents in the language with which they were most comfortable and address their concerns before putting them in contact with me.

The small number of youth who agreed to participate in this study is a limitation, and this speaks to the challenges of doing research with youth living with precarious status. Beyond the challenges inherent in the structure of the recruiting process, there were deeper barriers to overcome in terms of trust. I attempted to recruit participants through individuals who have worked with and/or continue to work with youth whose status is precarious, hoping that the youth’s positive and helpful interactions with these people would add to the confidence they felt in agreeing to participate. Unfortunately these connections were not sufficient to encourage many youth to contact me. This is understandable given that the existing research on people living with precarious status points to fear as an important factor in their decisions to access services. Moreover, I recognize that it is difficult and uncomfortable to speak to an individual who is a stranger to you about experiences that are very personal. In addition, there may have been added layers of hesitance to participate depending on the specifics of a youth’s immigration status. For instance, it is possible that a refugee claimant or recently regularized person
would be more willing to participate than a failed refugee claimant or someone whose visa had expired, as the latter may feel their situation to be more precarious. Beyond this, some youth may not realize they are considered to have precarious legal status or they may not understand what this means (Lowry and Nyers 2003): self-conceptualization may also have been a factor in recruiting participants.

**Introducing the youth**

Hector was 17 years old at the time of the interview and had lived in Toronto for almost two years. He was born in New Zealand but lived most of his life in Argentina; his first language is Spanish. His father was in Canada on a work permit that allowed Hector to attend school without having to pay fees. Although he was uncertain as to which documents he had, he knew that his permission to study had to be renewed each year; Hector did not have health coverage and was not eligible to work.

Isabel moved with her parents to Toronto two years before I met her; her older brother remained in Guatemala and she had not seen him since moving to Canada, but tried to stay in touch via email. She was 15 years old and was awaiting an appeal of her family’s refugee claim that was initially denied; she had a brown paper that gave her access to healthcare and education. Isabel’s first language is Spanish.

About five years prior to the interview, Sandra had moved to Toronto with her parents and her twin sister; she was 12 years old when we spoke. She missed her grandmother and other relatives who still lived in Chile and wished she could visit them. Her first language is Spanish. Sandra was not aware of her immigration status in Canada.
Gabriel had moved from Venezuela to Toronto five years before I met him; his first language is Spanish. For the first several months he and his family were in Canada, they lived in a motel with other immigrants and refugees. It took two years for the family’s refugee claim to be decided in their favour and they had been waiting three years for permanent resident status. Gabriel was 17 years old at the time of the interview.

Ibrahim’s family left Paraguay when he was six months old and entered Canada undetected. Since that time, they had been living without status in Toronto: he was 16 years old at the time of the interview and considers his first language to be English. A few years prior to our meeting, his parents began the process to ‘regularize’ the family’s immigration status. When I met him they were awaiting a decision on a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA) that would determine whether they could remain in Canada.

Elena was born in an Eastern European country but had lived in Toronto for four and a half years at the time of the interview; her first language is not English. She had recently found out that her family’s refugee appeal had been denied and that she would have to leave the friends she had made. The family, including her Canadian-born sister, was scheduled to be deported soon after I met her. Elena was 12 years old at the time of the interview.

These brief ‘biographies’ of the youth who participated show that each of them was living with a different kind of immigration status and that most of them had lived with various types of status during their time in Canada. Some of them even had documented or legally-recognized status: Hector had a temporary visa and student permit that he renewed each year and Gabriel’s family’s refugee claim had been accepted but they had yet to receive permanent residency. Nevertheless, a sense that emerged from
speaking with each of the youth was of the various ways in which one’s status can be precarious. Despite the differences in their status, the youth all experienced limitations in accessing services and endured a complicated sense of belonging.

**School as a site of belonging**

The uncertainty of their immigration status, and therefore of their tenure in Canada, influenced the youths’ experiences in different ways and had particular connections to their experiences at school. Beyond education being one of the key services accessed by youth, schools are also an important site of belonging. The school is an important social space where the youth negotiated their identities in relation to school officials, friends, and classmates. The youths’ participation in the academic and social aspects of school was a significant element in their lives particularly in terms of feeling a sense of belonging. In moments and at particular stages in relation to their immigration trajectory, most of the youth were aware that their precarious status had implications in their experiences at school. The school is also, as a public institution, implicated in relations of power and governance.

All six of the youth I spoke with were attending public schools in Toronto. School administrators, teachers, and even friends were often not aware of their status. The youth were able to trust close friends with knowledge of their situations, but beyond this were willing to disclose their status only to people they felt were in a position to help them, particularly when they encountered barriers to participating on sports teams or field trips. In these instances, the youth viewed disclosure of their status as part of the necessary terms of participation; however, on most occasions, the youth could get by
without having to acknowledge their status in their daily interactions at school. For some of the youth, it was their lack of health insurance in the form of an OHIP vi card that presented a challenge:

Well, I have some problems with the health card. Like when I have a field trip or something like that, my father has to do like a note saying like he’s responsible for me. And anything he has to pay, anything happens to me. (Hector)

Ibrahim indicated that he faced limitations “everywhere” yet in terms of access to services, he spoke about the “hassle” of having to go through extra steps or a more complicated process than other children would:

Yeah, but you have to go through a little more, and you know, a little longer process than anybody else would, right? But, yeah – it’s pretty much the same. As long as it’s within the country and within the boundaries of what I can do, seeing my status, then yeah. It’s just, they ask for it (health card) every time, right, so that’s all. I just have to talk to them or if it’s somebody new, I gotta tell them blah, blah, blah – the whole story and all that, and why. But yeah, and it’s weird because after you tell them, usually they’ll look at you different.

While the youth may have viewed the extra steps they had to go through to participate as a hassle or a ‘little longer process,’ this position of constantly having to explain one’s situation beyond what other children are asked to do is a barrier to participation.

At times, friends from school helped them to feel like they belonged while at others they pointed to the ways in which these youth felt different or like ‘outsiders.’ These feelings were related to their immigration trajectory – when aware of the process their family was going through, they expressed feelings of being different. Gabriel revealed that when he first arrived in Toronto and began school, he had a difficult time because he was unable to communicate with the other children in his class:

So, I only had like just one person that was…that I hung out with. He came from Argentina so we were like in the same situation, right. We had just come, we didn’t speak the language, so yeah, it was nice being with him because I couldn’t be with anybody else, right. I couldn’t even understand them or anything. So I used be with him and then, then he moved so those few days there was nobody, I felt really bad you know. I mean it was tough, right?
While his limited English skills when he first lived in Toronto contributed to Gabriel’s feelings of isolation, Isabel seemed to encounter a different response from the students at her school: “People – they’re nice. They don’t treat me like you don’t speak English or something. They treat you because of the way you are.” Similarly, Hector pointed to the importance of friends he had made in Toronto, indicating they helped him with English and provided information about school and sports teams.

Elena found awaiting the decision on whether or not her family would be allowed to stay in Canada tough: she thought about it “at night when I am alone, or in the morning.” Going to school was helpful because there she could play with her friends and “forget about” her family’s uncertain situation. Interacting with her friends at school provided a break from having to worry about her family’s situation. However Elena also spoke of how at times she felt “different” from her friends at school and she did not tell them about her status until she knew her family would have to leave the country because they had received a deportation order.

In the case of Ibrahim, school was alternately a place where he could do something to make his parents happy by getting good grades and a place where he felt he would have nothing to show for his time in Canada because in the end his time there benefited only himself, whereas if he worked he could at least make money to support his family. Understanding that the decision on his family’s case could go either way made him feel that his efforts at school would have been for nothing:

But the thing is I don’t want to be in school and then all of a sudden we gotta go, and then like I don’t have anything. Like I haven’t done anything, basically, like I’m gonna lose everything I have and I’ve pretty much accomplished nothing. So I’d rather be working towards something and let’s say everything does work out, then I’ll start school, and if it doesn’t work out, good thing I was working. Any money I make I can help my parents out.
Ibrahim’s approach to his situation is interesting: on the one hand he speaks of how the decision by immigration authorities can turn what he has accomplished at school into “nothing,” while on the other hand he attempts to resist this possibility by choosing to work to help support his family while they await the decision on their case. School was also a place where the uncertainty of his immigration status made it difficult to focus: he did not want to go to school, he skipped class, he did poorly on assignments, he was failing classes – his head just was not in school:

As soon as the case started getting, like I’m not going to blame it on the case, because obviously teenagers are lazy, but besides that point, like. As soon as it started getting bigger and bigger and like it started affecting my life more and more, my grades like, like I was always like thinking about it, like especially when – that’s when we actually started going to court a lot and like, it’s just a different transition, like doing all these different things. And it, in a way, it affected me really bad. I couldn’t concentrate, like at school I’d just be sitting down and be thinking about it and be like, what am I doing here? Like just so much questions in my head and I couldn’t concentrate on school and I couldn’t do this and then I wouldn’t get good grades and then my mum would get mad at me so it was just one big problem.

The uncertainty over his family’s situation had a significant impact on his life but Ibrahim did not feel that it was important to explain to the school what was happening with his family. Significantly, Ibrahim did not feel the school would be interested in his situation, and explained why he did not tell the school about his status:

But I didn’t really want to talk about it because it’s not like, like, my parents have said it many times, like, if you’re going to tell somebody, tell them if either you really want to tell them or tell them because they’re going to help you. Obviously if I just tell like the school, it’s not like they’re going to do anything about it, they’re just going to be, okay. And then they’ll just be like whatever, next thing. You know, they got to deal with a lot of people, right.

According to the youth, the schools were not aware of their immigration status in terms of both the youth and their parents not telling and the schools and teachers not asking. Isabel revealed her reasons for not telling people, apart from close friends, about her status:
Because it’s private I think. Well because, they’re going to be asking what’s my case, why am I like refugee claimant, they’d want me to tell our situation, why we’re here. It’s really private, we can’t tell anyone. That’s what they (immigration) said.

The lack of awareness on the part of schools of the challenges faced by students with uncertain immigration status emerged in particular when Gabriel revealed that his teachers and other people at the school “never even asked” about his status, and his tone suggested that he felt they did not care enough to understand his situation. The idea that nobody at the school took the time to ask about his situation seems to have had a lasting impact on Gabriel as he mentioned it six times through the course of the interview. He also spoke in different ways about how there was nothing anyone could have done to improve his situation or to help: “So like the days I was alone, yeah it was really bad…. I mean, I don’t think they could have helped me in the situation I was in, right.” Despite his conviction that his situation was beyond help, that no one at the school attempted to find out what was going on to understand how they might support him is telling. The experiences of the youth in this study point to the need for further discussion concerning the extent to which individuals in the education system are aware of how students’ immigration status may mediate their experiences.

Interestingly, not one of the youth felt that teachers, hospital staff, or coaches could be in a position to influence their status: Ibrahim expressed his trust that teachers are “taught to be confidential.” The youth seemed to trust in the systems and individuals who to some extent helped to determine their experiences. For instance, Ibrahim claimed, “the government isn’t going to leave you without medical coverage,” whereas in reality there is a significant number of people living in Canada without health insurance and who may be unable or unwilling to access health care (AAMCHC 2005; Bannerman
et al. 2003; CAAT 2001). For some of the youth, teachers and coaches were helpful in working through issues that arose with having to show documentation to participate in field trips and on sports teams; these helpful interactions could have contributed to their trust in school authorities. Hector initially had some trouble signing up for his school’s soccer team: “I had some problems with the health card, but there was a Spanish guy who was the coach and he helped me a lot.” However, despite the apparent confidence in school authorities by the youth in this study, they also indicated that teachers and school administrators were generally not aware of their status. The school’s lack of awareness of their immigration status could speak to the level of trust the youth had in these individuals and institutions. Subsequent to my research, which took place in the summer of 2005, the spring 2006 detention of several children in public schools in Toronto likely changed the level of comfort students living with precarious status had with school officials and spaces.

**Family dynamics and immigration status**

Several of the youth connected their experiences at school to their family situations, in the sense that for some going to school allowed them to be like their friends and forget about their precarious status, while for others it reminded them that they were ‘different.’ Their status was intimately tied into their home spaces, not only because they shared the legal status of their parents but also because their parents had expectations of them, at school in particular, regardless of the family’s status. The parents made sacrifices out of a sense that their children would benefit once the family’s status was determined. A
major decision many parents made was to shelter their children from knowledge of the family’s situation until they were older or until events meant they could no longer hide it.

Despite their status, the youth were able to develop and sustain a network of support persons both within and outside of Canada. The support of family, friends, and neighbours in Canada helped the youth as they attempted to negotiate the settlement process. This assistance included gaining access to services and programs, as well as helping their parents to find and keep employment in order to support their families and participate in the work of the community. For instance, Hector’s cousin was already living in Toronto when his family arrived, and his father found work with this cousin. When Sandra’s parents both had to work on the same schedule, they relied on a friend’s daughter to look after their children: “There is this girl…by my neighbourhood, she’s like…her mum is my mum’s best friend. So she takes care of me.” When Elena and her family arrived in Toronto, some of their relatives were already living in the city: these family members helped her father to find work.

The migration process presents challenges to family dynamics and authority structures as children are often not involved in these decisions and deliberations. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) found, “children in particular often have only a vague understanding of why the family is migrating” (p. 84); yet, parents’ decisions have an impact on the whole family. Although the youth were not fully involved in decisions around the migration process, they had to negotiate the ongoing consequences of being in Canada. While their parents attempted to shelter them, most of the youth were aware of the stresses involved in the process; however, age and immigration trajectory mattered here. The youths’ parents took care of the details associated with the migration process.
Both Ibrahim and Gabriel were to a certain extent aware of the stress involved for their parents, describing the amount of time they spent completing paperwork, meeting with lawyers, and preparing for various stages of the determination of status process.

Some of the youth were not aware of the extent to which their immigration status mediated their experiences, which in some cases resulted from their parents protecting them from knowledge of the family’s situation. There were different levels of awareness of immigration status amongst younger and older participants. For instance, Sandra, who was 12 years old, was unaware of her status (“my parents never told me”). This lack of awareness of her situation was clear from the beginning of the interview, so I modified the questions and we discussed her experiences at school and outside of school more generally. Although she was not aware of her status, a question Sandra asked at the end of the interview was interesting: “But is it true that like, is it sometimes for college you might not enter? Is that true?” While there was no indication that she connected the idea of not being able to go to college with precarious immigration status, it is possible that this was a first inkling that some people in Canada face limitations.\textsuperscript{vii}

Although Ibrahim seemed to be the most aware of his status at the time of the interview, he revealed that he did not find out until he was about 13 that he had been living in Canada with precarious status since he was 6 months old. His parents gradually revealed the situation to him, but he indicated that there had been hints of the family’s situation:

But when I was younger, thing is, I didn’t see much of what was going on because my parents had a good way of kind of covering it up. Like they didn’t really want me to know, like they wanted me to be like enjoying my youth years and all that but like, as I got older, I started noticing things. And then after a while they just, you know, you just hear about it because then they started going through the whole case thing and I heard about the whole story, it was like, wow, it’s really
shocking. Like when I heard that, I was like, wow. I’m in this, like, this is happening to me. Once Ibrahim found out about his status, it became a constant feature of his life, not so much in terms of access to services but more in terms of reflecting on the complexity of his family’s situation and confronting a sense that although they have lived here for more than 15 years, immigration officials could decide against them and they would have to leave Canada.

The youths’ identities were also negotiated in transnational spaces: they all spoke of connections to relatives outside of Canada and these spaces were tied into their senses of belonging. Due to their precarious status, they were unable to visit these relatives but through telephone and email they could maintain these connections. Their notions of ‘home’ were not limited to the space of one nation-state but rather were comprised of multiple and complex connections to both where they were now and where they had been. Ibrahim pointed to the complexity of his situation and of notions of belonging: Toronto was the only home he had ever known, yet he sensed that when officials or other people found out about his family’s status, they saw him differently and questioned why he was here. He had no knowledge or experience of the country in which he was born; in a sense, he had the strongest connection to and identification with Canada of the six participants in this study, yet he spoke in the most direct terms about his status and of the perception that he did not belong here. Ibrahim’s comments reflected great awareness of his precarious status and revealed a sense of turmoil and incredulity at his situation:

Like I said, I feel like this is my home because this is everything I know, like, and I feel at home here because I can walk around and feel safe, I know the area, I know the people that live around here. Like I know a lot of what’s around me. But, you know, as long as the government, like, they can say, okay no, you’re not accepted, and go. So, technically we really don’t have like, you know, we can’t really say that this is home to us.
Despite the evidence his life offered of the fact that Canada was his home, his status – and the reaction it elicited from government officials – told him that he did not have the right to claim it as home. This raises a key question in relation to notions of belonging and citizenship: how does one make sense of the fact that one’s daily existence points to ‘integration’ and ‘settlement’ while one’s status at times denies one a sense of belonging?

**Discussion and further questions**

This study raises important questions for further research regarding families’ communication strategies around immigration status and how youth understand and confront their status, as well as to what extent the education system understands the challenges faced by youth living with precarious status. It also shows the importance of contextualizing specific identities and experiences – age and immigration trajectory were key factors in the youths’ experiences of their status. As they got older or as their cases became more difficult, questions of status became more important.

In order to protect young children in particular from the challenges associated with living with precarious status, parents may delay making their children fully aware of the family’s precarious situation until it is necessary that they have an understanding of it (e.g. if a negative decision means they may face deportation). Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) encountered some undocumented youth in the US who did not learn about their family’s immigration status until they were applying to university and found out they could not attend: “In some cases, high school students do not know that they are undocumented until they begin to think about college and their parents are forced to tell them” (p. 35). This suggests that parents communicate around status in different
ways and on different timelines. In a sense this may allow children to have a ‘normal’ childhood. In seeking to shelter their children from full knowledge of the family’s status, parents bear the weight of the precariousness of their situation; however, in doing so, they claim a space in which their children can participate along with their peers. To a certain extent, they assert the legitimacy of their family’s presence in the community. This raises a host of questions for further research. In the case of families in which children may not yet be aware of their status, how do parents manage the barriers they face in order to protect their children from fully experiencing the same? To what extent and in what ways does the fact that there are different levels of awareness of the family’s legal status influence family dynamics and relationships? Moreover, how much do parents communicate to their children about the process of migration in general? What is a child’s understanding of the immigration process, in particular their family’s status?

The youth experienced the uncertainty of their tenure in Canada in different ways. School in particular was an important site in which they negotiated questions of belonging. For some of the youth, school was a place where they could be with friends and forget about their situations, while for others their time at school was a reminder of their status and fostered a sense that their time spent in Canada was meaningless. At times, friends from school helped the youth to feel like they belonged while at others they pointed to the ways in which they felt like ‘outsiders.’ In addition, the gap in understanding among teachers and school administrators of their students’ situations is critical and speaks to the need for educators to be aware of how immigration status mediates children’s experiences, particularly in terms of the impact of precarious status on a child’s motivations or outcomes. Several settlement and youth workers I spoke with
in Toronto suggested that school personnel are often unaware of the challenges faced by students and parents throughout the immigration and settlement process. In particular, schools tend to be unaware of the time and stress involved in this process especially for refugee claimants and those in the appeals stages, and beyond that they may not understand the apprehension experienced by families and youth whose legal status is uncertain or changing. In addition, the many ways in which people can come to have precarious status and the different kinds of immigration status are not well understood by many teachers and administrators. There are tremendous financial, emotional, social, and familial pressures that may make it difficult for youth living with precarious status to focus on or be motivated by school; some may choose or feel forced to drop out, as was the case with Ibrahim who decided that he could better support his family by taking time off from school to work while they awaited the decision on their status.

The question of to what extent teachers ought to be aware of details about students and their families, particularly with sensitive information like immigration status, is complicated. At one level there is a conviction – supported by the law – that schools should not ask for documentation of immigration status. Schools should not be placed in the position of assisting with the enforcement of immigration policy nor should families be required to reveal information that is personal and sensitive in order to gain entry to the education system for their children. At the same time, since it appears from this study that precarious status does factor into youth’s daily lives, teachers need to have an understanding of how immigration status could mediate a child’s experiences. This is not to say that teachers need to know the immigration status of each student, but rather that they should be aware of the challenges that some children in their classrooms may be
facing due to their status. School staff need to understand that immigration status affects a child's daily life. It is essential for them to be aware that the student in front of them could be living with this uncertainty and that this could be influencing their experiences and behaviour at school.

All children living with precarious status will eventually become aware of what it means to have such status in Canada. Whether it is a student in grade 12 contemplating university and realizing that his family cannot afford to pay international student fees or a 12-year old girl whose family is about to be deported, the significance of immigration status becomes blatantly clear. Barriers and limitations can come in many forms. For children who live part of their lives secure in the knowledge that they are ‘just like everybody else’ and then one day, or more gradually, discover that they are not, in fact, like all of their friends, the reality of immigration status may be a confusing and overwhelming adjustment. How do children respond to having their understanding of the world, and of their place in it, turned on its head? Do children in some way lose trust in their parents? And as Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) ask, “how does a child incorporate the notion that she is an alien, or an illegal – that she is unwanted and does not warrant the most basic rights of education and health care” (p. 7)? Inevitably children will come to know and confront their status and will have to make sense of what it means.
References


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\(^1\) Limiting the sample to youth living with their families meant that unaccompanied or separated minors would not qualify, as it was anticipated that their situations would differ due to the involvement of state agencies that may help these youth to access services (Montgomery 2002).

\(^\text{ii}\) For a detailed examination of the ethics review process and risk mitigation methods employed, see Bernhard and Young (2009).
All names used are pseudonyms and countries of origin have been changed.
Her father indicated that the family’s refugee claim had been denied and that they have no medical coverage.

The 2001 Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, Section 30(2), indicates that: “Every minor child in Canada, other than a child of a temporary resident not authorized to work or study, is authorized to study at the pre-school, primary or secondary level.” Despite the fact that Section 49.1 of the Ontario Education Act also guarantees the right to education to all children without discrimination on the basis of legal status, this policy is applied inconsistently by school boards. In spring 2006, there were some highly publicized incidents where immigration enforcement officials came into two public schools and detained children in order to draw in their parents. The public outcry that resulted factored into the Toronto District School Board’s adoption in 2007 of a policy on ‘Students without Legal Status,’ which clarifies that school officials should not participate in enforcing immigration policy. However, a recent report indicates that students are still having problems registering in certain boards (Bejan and Sidhu 2010).

Ontario Health Insurance Plan.

Her father mentioned to me before the interview that the child of a friend of theirs is not able to go to university due to their status and the high cost of tuition (since students who are neither citizens nor permanent residents must pay international fees in Ontario). It is possible that Sandra had overheard conversations about this.

I explore the youth’s (and their parents’) contestations of membership at length in Young (forthcoming).