

A research project examines the situation for youth in care who lack Canadian status, for whom the transition to independence is immeasurably complex

## Youth in the child-welfare system who lack Canadian status

BY FRANCIS G. HARE, PhD

This article introduces a research project, which is being conducted in collaboration with Toronto child-welfare authorities and Pape Adolescent Resource Centre (PARC), on separated youth who lack Canadian status and are in transition from the child-welfare system.

The project's origins lie in discussions with PARC staff about information they should have on youth in their database. A recurring theme was the importance of knowing whether the youth had Canadian status. PARC staff help youth in transition from care with education, employment, and health issues, which are immeasurably complicated if the youth lack status. Recent research on the importance of these social determinants of health has shown that a lack of status predicts increased vulnerability. ([www.ryerson.ca/~sdohyout](http://www.ryerson.ca/~sdohyout))

The two basic ways that a child without Canadian status would end up in the child-welfare system would be to arrive alone at a port of entry, or arrive with family but be taken into care prior to obtaining status. While most of the literature deals



with the former situation, we discovered that this is simply not the case for up to 90 percent of the Toronto youth in care without status, likely because Toronto per se lacks a port of entry. As the project

evolves we hope to conduct comparative research in the Ontario regions of Peel (where the international airport is located) and Niagara (with border crossings) as well as in Montréal and Vancouver (each a major metropolis with a port of entry.)

Our current research is supported by the Joint Centre of Excellence for Research in Immigration and Settlement (CERIS) and based at PARC, where we have been interviewing staff and youth who have been involved in the process of obtaining status. We have also benefited from discussions with the Honourable Elinor Caplan, the former federal Minister of Immigration. Many people associated with the Ontario child-welfare system believe that it lacks the ability to apply for status on behalf of youth in care, a belief that Minister Caplan suggests is neither warranted nor in

the best interests of the child if legal guardianship rests with the child-welfare authorities.

Where do we go from here? One obvious extension is to look more closely at the situations in the three principal receiving provinces of Ontario, Québec, and British Columbia. We could examine provincial variation in the legal and social-support components of obtaining status for youth in the child-welfare system, reviewing existing documents from academic, governmental, agency, and NGO sources, and interviewing youth and other key informants. It will also be important to collaborate with advocacy groups such as the National Youth in Care Network ([www.youthincare.ca](http://www.youthincare.ca)). It may be worthwhile to organize a national workshop with interested parties to compare notes, share practices, and advocate on behalf of state-dependent children who lack Canadian status.

We welcome inquiries and suggestions, especially from youth who have been or are involved in obtaining status. We also welcome potential collaborators as we develop proposals for the next phases of the project. We hope to take this project to BC at some point and would welcome an opportunity to get together with like-minded people there. Please contact us at [fhare@ryerson.ca](mailto:fhare@ryerson.ca).

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banking, the Canadian school system, Canadian culture, drugs and alcohol, and other subjects were discussed.

Teachers verbally reported that many of the youth who were previously withdrawn displayed improved social and communication skills. This was a significant change for the youth, who reported feeling socially out-cast before their involvement. Several teachers also noted that these students showed an improved ability to speak in front of the class.

The youth verbally reported better cross-cultural understanding, increased sense of belonging in the school and community, and more self-confidence. This was true for those who experienced their first cross-cultural friendships by sharing cultural music and traditions. They also developed a sense of pride in volunteer work within the school and community, and improved their English.

### What did we learn?

- **Youth worker enthusiasm is more important than gender, language, or culture.** Initially, the staff recruitment panel was concerned that it might be difficult for a female worker to earn the trust from an all-male group. Ultimately, we recruited a Caucasian, female worker who did not understand Chinese, Korean, or Farsi. Her enthusiasm about youth, her dynamic personality, and her strong communication skills (as

opposed to facility in the languages of the participants) earned her trust from all the youth members and their parents. She built very positive relationships within a short time span.

- **A personal touch is powerful.** Building successful worker-member relationships depended on more than the program alone. Throughout the project, the youth worker connected with individual members through one-to-one telephone and in-person interviews. This allowed students to discuss their thoughts and feelings in detail without being concerned about what the other group members might think. In addition, a number of participants visited the youth worker in their spare time. The youth were able to discuss their ideas for the program, practice their English, prepare resumés, and receive support from the worker.
- **Program design facilitates cross-cultural relationship-building.** The youth worker reported that, at the beginning, youth members tended to cling to their own ethnic groups and speak their own languages. However, the specific program design supported the members to begin establishing cross-cultural friendships quickly. Informal activities outside of the classroom that encouraged group member interaction and cooperation were most effective. In the process, we witnessed older youth taking the initiative to help the younger ones, and those who spoke better English providing support to others who were less fluent. A turning point occurred in a camping activity where youth taught each other their different cultural dances.
- **Community volunteer work provides a venue for building a sense of belonging and self-worth.** Group members ranked their community volunteer work as one of the activities they valued most. Through this, members were able to connect with the community; for many, this was their first experience of working with people less fortunate than themselves. Because of high student interest, volunteer work with the homeless continued until the end of the program. The members organized various fundraisers and with the proceeds made sandwiches to feed the homeless. Anti-

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oppression workshops helped them discover special meaning in their community service. By offering active support to the needy, the members found a sense of self-worth.

- **Peer recognition is powerful.** Peer recognition improved the participants' self-confidence. Youth discovered that academic achievement, as stressed in their cultures of origin, was not the only way to earn recognition. Being recognized by their peers as the best cook in the camp, the most skilled snowboarder, or the best dancer in the group were all perceived as equally empowering. Teachers reported that, as a result of peer recognition, students were more confident in doing presentations in the class. This, in turn, helped to build greater self-confidence.
- **School support is important.** The project was fortunate in receiving full support from the Coquitlam School District. The assistant superintendent, district psychologist, and school personnel (principals, counselors, and teachers) at Pinetree Secondary and Glen Eagle Secondary participated from the beginning. Their contributions to planning, staff recruitment, research, and evaluation (pre- and post-project measurement), participant recruitment, arrangements for activity space, and granting of course credits were all essential to the project's success. Staff members of S.U.C.C.E.S.S. were impressed by the openness of

school personnel to make changes to accommodate project requirements.

### **Don't forget the parents**

Because many youth come from cultures where parental approval is paramount, the program tried to involve parents in the process from recruitment to evaluation. The holistic support from S.U.C.C.E.S.S. in interpretation/translation, and in other settlement-related services made it possible for the youth worker to interact more easily with parents—and even, in some cases, to connect parents who required assistance with appropriate community resources.

### **Limitations of the demonstration project**

In spite of the success of the project, and although the youth members were fully prepared to mentor a new group of students, the Fraser Children and Family Development Fund only provided funding for one year. We also learned that we should extend this model to an all-female or mixed-gender group. It was unfortunate that we were not able to secure additional support because of late timing in the funding cycle. We have provided feedback to the Fraser Children and Family Development Fund to explore possible transition funding for successful projects and allow other funders to participate.

Overall, the Multicultural Youth Entry Project was successful because of the collaborative efforts of Coquitlam School District and S.U.C.C.E.S.S. It is an example of how combining community expertise and resources can contribute to a valuable learning experience for youth from different cultures, who then have greater willingness and ability to give back to their communities.

For more information, visit:

S.U.C.C.E.S.S., [www.success.bc.ca](http://www.success.bc.ca)

Association of Multicultural Societies and Service Agencies, [www.amssa.org](http://www.amssa.org)