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Invisible Students: Institutional Invisibility and Access to Education for Undocumented Children

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Abstract

In Canada, undocumented children are "institutionally invisible" - their access to education to be found in unwritten and discretionary practices. Drawing on the experience of a three-year university-community partnership among researchers, institutional and community stakeholders, this article examines how undocumented children become excluded from free education in Quebec. Proposing the notion of "institutional invisibility," we argue that issues of access and entitlement for undocumented children are constructed within unwritten and ambiguous practices that make the lives of young people invisible to the institutional entities with which they interact. Through the establishment of a collaborative research space, we were able to hear a range of contradictory perspectives which have often gone unheard in simplistic representations of the "state" or "policies" as homogenous entities. The article reflects on the role of action research in both documenting dynamics and pathways of invisibility in undocumented children's access to education, as well as in initiating social change - as both horizontal, and vertical mobilisation.

Keywords: education; undocumented children; youth; migration; entitlement; deservingness; access to social services; action research; policy; invisibility; Canada

The invisibility occurs because of a peculiar disposition of the eyes of those with whom I

come in contact.

Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

Introduction

This article is about the making of institutional invisibility in relation to undocumented

students in Canada. It is about particular dispositions of the eyes of those who come in

contact and, often, do not come in contact at all, with undocumented children and their

families. And, finally, it is about the ways in which we tried, through the establishment of

a community-university partnership, to unmake this invisibility.

We define here "institutional invisibility" as a set of norms and practices that are

often unwritten and ambiguous, making specific groups of people disappear, in a social,

legal and political sense. Families living without legal status exist in such space of non-

existence - outside national borders, hidden within niches of social reality (Coutin, 2003).

In Canada, between 200,000 and 500,000 persons are estimated to live without

legal status - a quarter of whom are minors (Goldring et al., 2009). Approximately 3,000

undocumented school-age children are considered to live in Quebec (Rousseau et al.,

2013). The precarisation of legal status has been the consequence, on the one hand, of the

tightening of immigration policies and, on the other, of the negative public opinion,

shifting from representations of the vulnerable "other" to the idea of migrants as potential

fraud and criminals (Crépeau and Nakache, 2006). These increasingly restrictive policies

have also jeopardized the access to services of many people living with a precarious migratory status, making them illegal and vulnerable at multiple levels (Magalhaes et al., 2010).

This article analyses a specific situation of institutional invisibility: the limited access to education for undocumented children in Montreal, Canada. Under Quebec law, even if access to public education for all minors is both a right and a requirement, *free* education is provided only to legal residents. Specific categories of people are classified as legal residents of the province: Canadian citizens; permanent residents; asylum seekers; foreign workers. Yet, the specific group of "undocumented children" simply fails to be mentioned *at all* by the law.[1]

The issue of access to education for undocumented children rested, therefore, on various discretionary institutional practices. The perceptions of teachers, the relative sensitivity of school administrations, the advocacy of community organizations, and the fear and silence of children and their families: they all played a role in determining whether a child would be successful in enrolling and attending school.

This article describes a three-year collaborative partnership among research, institutional, and community stakeholders which was established in order to understand these unwritten practices, and to move towards policy change. Our aim here is twofold. First, we document trajectories and discourses of invisibility in the context of access to education. Second, we reflect on the role of action research, and on its methodological and ethical implications, in conducting scholarly work and in promoting social change.

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[1] The fact that there is no mention of these children in the law could be partially explained by the relatively low numbers of children without legal status in Canada in the past decades.

As we will explain more in detail, this project was an unanticipated result of research: it emerged from the unexpected findings of a study on access to health care for undocumented migrant women and children.[2] When the voices of the women interviewed in this study paralleled the advisory committee's casework experiences – insisting that access to education for undocumented children was an urgent problem – we were prompted to broaden the initial study's objectives, and to conduct a project in order to shatter the institutional invisibility of this issue.

Framing institutional invisibility

The issue of access to social services is deeply connected to a more profound ethical question: which children should have – or deserve - the right to these services? (Ruiz-Casares et al., 2010). Willen (2011) defines deservingness as the flip side of rights: "*rights* are presumed to have universal relevance, even when they are not universally enjoyed in practice, whereas *deservingness* is always reckoned in relative terms" (814). Particular groups may be considered undeserving specific rights, such as health care or housing, on the basis of presumed or actual characteristics – for instance, their status as non-citizens. In the last years, many scholars have examined discourses and representations shaping one's sense of deservingness, especially in relation to health care (Vanthuyne et al., 2013 , Willen, 2012 , Yarris and Castañeda, 2015).

However, norms of entitlement can be intertwined with pathways to access in non-obvious ways. For example, assessments of deservingness, as stated in policies and laws, may significantly differ from informal norms at local and regional levels (Watters, 2011).

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[2] Research Project "The Migratory Status of the Child and Limited Access to Health Care: Equity an Ethical Challenges," funded by CIHR (Canadian Institute of Health Research), grant number 201355.

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These practices are often driven by what Lukes (2005) defines "covert preferences:" stakes and interests which may not even be voiced, fully articulated, or written. And yet, these preferences can operate, at a local level, in important ways that are distinct from broader government policies.

Moreover, pathways to illegality can be shifting and ambiguous, bringing into question any clear boundary between legality and illegality (Bosniak, 2008), and further complicating the relationship between deservingness and exclusion from social rights (Bhabha, 2004). The issue of access to education for undocumented children is an example. While undocumented children are not explicitly constructed by the law as undeserving subjects, neither are they portrayed as deserving. Because of their contradictory status as both minors in need of protection *and* as illegal migrants who should be rejected, they simply fail to be mentioned at all by the law (Meloni et al., 2014).

This article proposes the analytical framework of institutional invisibility in order to integrate the missing link between questions of access and deservingness. When it is morally difficult to assess who deserves what, as in the case of undocumented children who have a conflicting social status, silent attitudes and norms play a key role in determining access to services. To put it in another way, these children have limited access to education not because they are explicitly considered as undeserving, but because they are made institutionally invisible – as if they are not there. They are not even mentioned, in the debate of deservingness – precisely because their moral assessment would be problematic. Considering institutional invisibility as a social,

administrative, legal and political construction then allows us to explore policies and practices which may be contradictory and which, often, are not even there.

In the following section, we will describe in detail how the experience of our university-community partnership helped us to unpack the issue of access to education – at the level of laws, policies, and practices.

The process of collaboration

As Metha (2008) put it, "policy research is not only about evidence and outcomes but also about the process through which these are constructed" (235). In our case, the process of our research has been essential to underpin both evidence and outcomes. In determining the course of the process, our multiple roles have been certainly crucial.

As we already mentioned, all authors were involved in a research project on access to health care for precarious status women and children. Moreover, each of us was affiliated to both a university, and a community health centre or a community organisation. This double role allowed us to consider the problem of access to education not only from the perspective of researchers, but also from our experience of clinicians and community organisers who had a sense of what was happening on the ground. Furthermore, these multiple affiliations made it possible to establish collaborations with social workers, lawyers and community advocates willing to take action, and to offer direct support to undocumented children.

Our community-university partnership thus emerged from a confluence of events, both in the community and university setting. As mentioned above, unexpected findings from a research project on access to health care led to the establishment of a working

group on access to education in September 2010. With the involvement of researchers, community organisations, community health centres, school boards, the Department of Youth Protection, and the Ministry of Education, the working group aimed to: (1) document barriers in access to education for undocumented children; (2) create collaborative partnerships between researchers, community health centres and community organisations, in order to facilitate access to education on a case-by-case basis; and (3) to engage different stakeholders, in order to develop policies and guidelines, as well as to monitor school practices.

The project can be divided into three phases, as shown in Figure 1. In the first phase, the problem of access to education emerged as an unforeseen yet central finding of our study. This prompted us to widen the research design to include access to education, and establish a steering committee with community organizations, a legal clinic, and children's advocates. Following this, in the second phase, the steering committee helped to document pathways to access and developed a support network to help undocumented children on a case-by-case basis. Finally, the third phase involved the mobilisation of institutional stakeholders in a working group in order to develop policies.

FIGURE TO INSERT HERE (SEE ATTACHED DOCUMENT)

Listening to women's voices

As part of our research project on access to health care for precarious status migrants, we interviewed undocumented women regarding access to health care during their

pregnancy. While we initially expected to document the difficulties these women face in getting adequate medical treatment for themselves and their children, we came to realise that issues around education for their children were often more troubling and long-lasting for them.

The barriers they encountered in access to education were multiple. Some women complained that the school administration refused to enrol their children because they did not hold valid immigration documents. Other children were accepted into school but were asked to pay high tuition fees, since they were considered non-residents. Moreover, both the school administration and the families did not know what documents were needed, and what the existing policies were. One woman, who has lived without legal status for many years, explained her confusion:

When I finally got my status and I went to Immigration, they asked me why my nine-year-old child didn't go to school for two years, when we did not have papers. They told me that my child didn't need a study permit to go to school. But I didn't know that! Because that's the thing: you need to be informed and know stuff. And when I went to the school, they just told me that they didn't want to take him. So they need to inform the school about that stuff, too! Because at the school, they asked me for a study permit although he didn't need it. And if you don't have papers, then you have to pay fees. And they charge like crazy!

Many women also voiced their concerns about school registration. Even if schools sometimes turned a blind eye and allowed children to attend school without paying fees,

children were not officially registered by the Ministry of Education. And, since their education was considered unofficial, many of these students were denied their final diploma. Although physically present in the education system, they were not formally recognised as such.

The mothers of these children certainly used the research space to make their voices heard, their distress visible. By transmitting their worries, and their children's suffering related to school – worries and suffering that can have a huge impact on health and wellbeing – they were moving us toward action. Without asking us directly, they prompted us to act.

As in many action research approaches, the process of listening to the voices of these women was a turning point that shifted the study design into an action-oriented approach. Yet, different from more traditional participatory action research which is conducted *by* and *for* those taking the action, with the goal to empower subjects and move toward an emancipatory result (Chatterton et al., 2007), our research did not quite follow such a straightforward line. Children and their families –the main subjects for which our action was taken - were not directly involved in our collaborative endeavor, and yet they played a significant role in reframing our initial research aims.[3]

Women's voices resonated with our experience not only as researchers, but also as clinicians and community organisers. These voices also echoed the stories we heard from many community organisers, service providers, and community health staff who were part of the research project's advisory board. The resonance of the same issue contributed to the feeling of urgency that stirred us to shift the research focus. And yet, as

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[3] Although we can consider, in important ways, our project as "action research" – a project where action and research became intimately intertwined (Brydon-Miller et al., 2003), we did not follow more traditional participatory action research approaches.

we came to realise, the same story turned into a completely different one, when it was told from another perspective.

In November 2010, we organised a first meeting with different community subjects that were interested and affected by the issue: two community organisations which were also members of the advisory board of the project on access to health care; a legal clinic serving precarious status migrants; a support centre for newcomer families; and an organisation for children's advocacy.[4] The aim of this introductory meeting was to create a steering committee of persons concerned; to document and detail the different situations that precarious status immigrants faced; and to look for possible solutions.

Community perspectives

The first issue emerging from the steering committee was the heterogeneity, not to say the confusion, of practices. The puzzle faced by the women we met was also experienced by community workers. They also lacked clear information about the norms adopted by school boards, and the existing policies. Whereas undocumented children could be accepted to some schools, they could be refused by others, being asked for different identification documents or to pay diverse levels of fees.

Since the practices were so disparate and scattered, we decided that, as a first step in moving towards policy change, it was necessary to act at the micro level, and to collect data about what was happening on the ground. We created a collaborative support

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[4] One person for each of these groups participated in the steering committee, for a total of nine persons involved, including us. Another twelve people involved in community organisations joined the group in the following months. Five meetings were held by the steering committee (before launching the working group with institutional stakeholders) and e-mails were often exchanged to discuss specific cases of access to education. The research team's role, through this entire process, was to organise meetings; coordinate the working group; and manage communication.

network among the members of the steering committee, in order to document cases of denied access to education, and to help families enrol their children.[5]

The tactics of this horizontal mobilisation varied in response to different circumstances. Here, we provide some examples of actions that were undertaken within the group. In some instances, barriers to access were related to families' lack of information and worries of being deported. Fear of disclosing immigration status to the school, which would render children visible and more at risk, often prevented some families from asking for full information about the registration of their child, or from seeking advice. In this case, we would put the family in contact with the community legal clinic which was part of our working group. This often helped to reassure the family about their rights, or supported them with their immigration situation.

Other times, barriers to access emerged from the restrictive practices of schools or school boards. When a school refused to enrol the child, or when the family could not afford to pay the registration fees, we asked for the help of a social worker of a community health center. The social worker would meet the family and provide an assessment − attesting that the denial of education would cause the child irreparable damage for her/his psychological development and wellbeing. This professional assessment was used strategically by the family, with the support of the community organisation. Specifically, it was used to advocate for the discretionary power of the Ministry of Education to waive registration fees. This process was repeated with a number of cases and, though successful in the cases we followed, it was very onerous for

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[5] The steering committee documented and supported about 20 cases per year. Thanks to the collaboration between the members of the committee, each time we have been successful in getting the child enrolled in school. In the context of case support for children, we acted as intermediators: we linked the families (who were referred to us by community organisations) with social workers. Our twofold role of researchers affiliated to a community health center, or to a community organisation, was essential in this process.

the family and the workers. Moreover, the families often felt highly exposed in having to present their personal case to the Minister of Education's office.

To be sure, these actions were extremely precarious - as insecure was the population they were supporting. They were based on the singularity of each case, and did not guarantee that the child could successfully be enrolled at school. However, this work of support and documentation uncovered, and made clear, two of the main challenges to access to education. First, at the level of the law, a clear policy was missing. Second, at the level of practices, contradictory attitudes informed and shaped the decisions of schools. While school principals had to comply with budgetary frames and obligations in regard to access to education for non-resident children, they had also to respect children's rights and ensure access to school. As a result, decisions remained arbitrary, and a similar situation could lead to completely divergent results, if taken by different school directors or institutions.

This experience of case advocacy, then, underscored the importance of political change to create a normative system of entitlement to education, rather than a fragile network of discretionary access. Yet, in order to make some effective change at the level of policies, we still lacked certain key voices and perspectives: those of school boards and policy-makers. We then decided to include institutional stakeholders in the working group - at the local, and the provincial level.

Identifying policy actors

In organising a first meeting in March 2011, an initial challenge was to strategically identify the most appropriate people with whom we could collaborate. Our decision was

informed by the experience of the steering committee, which unpacked the knot of access

to education from three different angles: the law; its application; and the protection of

children rights. We then believed that it was essential to involve subjects who dealt with

these three perspectives in their daily work.

At the level of the law, we contacted the Ministry of Education, which has the

power to determine broad guidelines for the education system, and to allocate resources

to the school boards. Equally important, the Ministry guarantees the validity of the

diplomas – a key issue for many undocumented children. A consultant working in the

Ministry of Education, in the department of services for cultural community, actively

participated in the working group. His collaboration has been decisive in providing

information about the existing policies, and about the policy changes which were most

likely to be acceptable to the Ministry. Although not involved in decision-making at a

higher level, this person played an important role in establishing a trust relationship

between the working group and the Ministry.

At the level of law application, we involved different school boards in the region

of Montreal. School boards are responsible for the registration of children and they hold

jurisdiction over planning, supervision, evaluation, and support. Among the five school

boards in Montreal, four decided to participate in the working group.

Finally, in terms of children's rights protection, we included an organisation for

child advocacy and two Youth Protection agencies responsible for the security and

development of a child – regardless of the child's immigration status.[6] Notably, the

security or development of a child may be considered to be in danger if a child does not

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[6] All of their services are mandated by the Québec Youth Protection Act, the Canadian Youth Criminal
Justice Act, and other applicable legislation.

attend school, or is frequently absent without reason. We thus hoped that the youth protection institutions were able to advocate for greater access to education for undocumented children.

The power to discover the law

The very fact that a space of discussion and collaboration was created between community and institutional actors was the first step to unravel, and connect together the discourses and interests of different subjects - in the hope of determining a common strategy of action. The first action we took in this direction was to discover the grey areas within the law, and its different (mis)interpretations. By discovering the law, we mean to uncover law and regimes of power as comprising "more than legal codes, government policies, and bureaucratic apparatuses" (Coutin, 1993 88). As Calavita (1998) has argued with respect to the production of illegality in Spain, "there may be no smoking gun, but there is nonetheless a lot of smoke in the air" (557). Without any smoking gun, we still had to understand where all the smoke came from.

Not surprisingly, we found that there was little discussion about undocumented children and access to education in either immigration or education policies. The bulk of the action took place off the record. What slowly emerged, during the meetings of the group, was a reciprocal understanding of the myriad of underground practices, half-written guidelines, and contradictory interpretations of the law which evoked opacity, rather than transparency.

As we explained earlier, there was a "legal black hole" (Wilde, 2005) regarding these children, meaning that there was no mention of this specific category and their

rights. Interestingly, this legal vacuum created the impression, especially in institutional subjects at higher levels, that the issue did not exist at all. In the first meeting of the working group, the representative of the Ministry tended to minimise the problem: after all, there was no mention of these children in the law, and these issues were never brought to their attention by the schools. When he later was confronted with the experiences of school boards and community organisations, he expressed his genuine surprise, stating that "we have never perceived the situation as real." In the rooms of the Ministry, indeed, it was as if these children were not part of social reality.

While for policymakers the issue was non-existent, it was real enough at the level of its application. For school boards, it was acutely felt as a financial burden to their system capacity because they received no additional funding for undocumented children attending their schools. They were then left with a huge responsibility and were often caught in an ethical dilemma - that of deciding who should have access to school. Each school board adopted different administrative practices of entitlement – they decided what documents were needed, and what categories of undocumented children they should accept. These norms were not entirely official or written,[7] nor homogenously applied by schools. The school board directors on the working group expressed a feeling of being isolated: they were alone without any guidelines or information from the Ministry of Education, and without any support from other school boards. Each school board was, in fact, completely unaware about how others in the region of Montreal were struggling with similar situations. The meetings of the working group became then essential in order to establish a reflective space of discussion where, for the first time, the issue was

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[7] Procedures about access to education could be, for instance, published on the website of a school board, although an official institutional policy was not necessarily communicated to schools.

recognised. And where, most importantly, the heterogeneity of unofficial practices became visible.

Two main problems were raised by the school boards. Firstly, there were multiple enrolment procedures. A few schools demanded only a birth certificate as a proof of identity, as required by the provincial regulation, while most also required a valid immigration document. For particular cases of children in a legal limbo – for instance, children who were awaiting a decision on humanitarian and compassionate grounds - some schools accepted the child without asking for any registration fees, while others refused access altogether.

Secondly, even when the child managed to enrol in school, there were barriers in terms of bureaucracy and administration. Normally, a child receives a lifetime permanent code from the Ministry of Education, which allows the student's credits to be recognised provincially and to issue the diploma. In the case of children registering for the first time without any legal residency, the lack of proof of Quebec residency prevented a permanent code from being issued. As one school board representative bluntly put it in one of the meetings, "if you do not have a permanent code, simply you do not exist." Without this code, children then became legally and socially invisible.

Establishing an action plan

The collaborative environment, which was slowly formed over the months, helped to unveil the messiness of the practices and to foresee potential solutions. With time, people felt comfortable expressing their concerns and perspectives. The fact of listening to others' experiences created a common space of reflexivity – where people questioned

their own practices, and gradually shifted the perception of their own role. For instance, many institutional subjects – especially the ones who did not encounter undocumented children in their daily work – initially felt that they were not directly concerned. Yet, when they later learned about the difficult ways in which others were trying to accommodate these children, they became aware of the constraints of policies, but also of their own institution. At the same time, community actors also nuanced the negative opinions that they had about institutions, becoming more conscious of the challenges that they faced. This process facilitated a common understanding of the issue, and moved institutions towards action.

It was after one year that the working group decided that time was ripe to take collective action. A letter and a background document were sent to the Ministry of Education, outlining the main problems and possible solutions. The representative of the Ministry helped in giving suggestions and insights about how to develop the letter. At the level of access to school, we asked the Ministry of Education to develop clear policies and guidelines that would make undocumented children living in Quebec one of the categories having free access to education. The premise of the working group was that education should be free for all children *residing* in Quebec. Then, we recommended that the legal definition of "resident" should be modified, allowing free education as based on factual residency rather than legal immigration status. At the level of administrative barriers, we requested that a permanent code had to be issued. Moreover, a document on the long-term social and financial negative cost of the exclusion of undocumented

children from education was drafted by one of the researchers, in order to support the adoption of new policies.[8]

The draft of the document was a gradual, slow and collaborative process. Regular meetings were organised in order to discuss and finalise the documents, with the participation of many members of the working group. Researchers and community organisations prepared a preliminary draft; then, school boards and the representative of the Ministry gave their feedback and added a layer of complexity to the explanations of different situations of denied access.

Policy change

In September 2013, subsequent to the advocacy letter and to public demonstrations of an activist collective for access to education for undocumented children,[9] the Minister of Education finally announced new regulations. Yet, the main changes allowed not a reformulation of the notion of resident - which would have required an integral modification of the law. Rather, they broadened the categories of non-resident children who were entitled - as an *exception* to the law - to free education. The new policy added new classifications of precarious status migrants,[10] as well the definition of children

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[8] Jill Hanley analysed the long-term negative social impact of exclusion from education.

[9] This public mobilisation had a significant impact in terms of strategic media pressure, bringing the issue to the public eye. Yet, it was also perceived with ambivalence by institutional actors, some of whom felt that the organisation was promoting a "radical" portrayal of the issue that unnecessarily polarised the debate. The tone of the public actions also created the impression that undocumented children can almost never attend school, which may have the unintended result of increasing the fears of families and may discourage them from seeking support.

[10] New categories include, for instance, children who are refused refugee status but come from countries where there are moratoria on removal. It is important to note that these categories of children all have a temporary legal right to remain, and do not explicitly include undocumented children who are not allowed, by any legal means, to remain in the national territory.

"being followed"[11] by social workers at a community health center or a Youth Protection Agency.

In these new regulations, undocumented children were yet again not mentioned at all. Two were the main reasons. First, a redefinition of the category of resident would have required a change in the law, which is a much slower and complicated process. Second, perhaps these children were still unmentionable, due to their unlawful status. And yet, the notion of "being followed" was deliberately left ambiguous, in order to allow space for action. The strategic support network working to get children into schools – which, before then, was merely informal and only included community organisations – was now, even if ambiguously, recognised and extended to institutional subjects such as youth protection agencies.

With the passing of this new guideline, the institutional actors involved (school boards, community health center and youth protection agencies) felt that they were given the capacity to address most of the problem from an administrative perspective. In our experience since the changes, every case we have brought forward, with an attestation that the child is being followed, has been successful in enrolling the child in school without tuition fees and with an official registration code. So although this policy offers only a backdoor, it does seem to be open.

At this point, the most important difficulty limiting access has become lack of information. Those most concerned by the issue (community groups and families themselves) remain largely unaware of the changes. A year and half after the new regulations, families are still approaching community groups unaware of the loophole that can allow their children into school relatively easily. Or, perhaps even more

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[11] What in French is translated by "prise en charge."

disturbing, parents reported that they knew about the new regulation but feared to expose their status to institutions. Without an official "don't ask, don't tell" policy, the assurance that school boards respect confidentiality and do not share information with immigration authorities fail to assuage the fears.

Concluding reflections

Although the objective of obtaining full access for undocumented children has not yet been totally reached, the process of the working group - its positive results, and its pitfalls - are significant in highlighting key questions concerning how we can better understand the making of illegality and social marginalisation.

To be sure, the experience of our collaborative research brought questions of access and entitlement into a new light. While hearing different yet complementary perspectives, we came to realise that we were dealing with hidden practices of invisibility, rather than transparent norms. In the last years, many scholars have called for a study of illegality as an historical, political and social construction (see: De Genova, 2002). In line with this approach, many have examined the ways in which legal regimes make migrants undeserving and outsiders from the community of citizens. Yet, in the case of undocumented children, social exclusion was created within the silences and absences of laws. If laws did produce something, it was an *absence*, rather than an excess. Proposing the notion of "institutional invisibility," we argue that access and entitlement are often constructed within unwritten and ambiguous practices that make the lives of people invisible to the institutional entities with which they interact.

For the Ministry of Education, it was as if these children did not exist at all – simply because there was no mention of them in the law. For school boards, these young people represented an unspoken dilemma. They were not officially recognised as students with a valid registration code, even if they were physically present in the school system. They were there, yet they did not exist at a legal and administrative level. The arbitrary attitudes of some of the school boards were implicitly condoned by the silence of the Ministry, and unchallenged by families and children who were afraid to expose their status.

In order to understand these opaque and intricate ways in which institutional invisibility is shaped, it becomes crucial to create different collaborative research strategies beyond the university. It is key, in the field of undocumented migration, to open a dialogue with all subjects involved: policy-makers, school administrators, community organisations (Atweh et al., 2002 , Ross et al., 2003). But this is not simply necessary because researchers, as many have argued, "need to translate their work more effectively and for a much broader array of audiences" (Willen et al., 2011: 333).

In our experience, the methodological and epistemological dimensions became blurred, in a more profound sense - opening new ways for thinking about issues of illegality and access to social services. The shift in our research focus – from health care to education - was triggered by those who had the most at stake: the mothers of undocumented children themselves. By voicing their concerns, they made visible to us an issue that we did not initially intend to study. Our research process was not linear – it did not begin with a question and ended with a solution. Neither was our research objective in any reductive sense. It was rather an unpredictable process of sequential reflection,

research, and action, carried out with and by different subjects (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). Research and intervention then became intimately entwined, and it became impossible to separate the two in any meaningful way. This created possibilities for learning and acting that reformulated the entire research process as reflective endeavour between different voices and stakes (Meloni et al., 2015). In this sense, we acted because women's concerns triggered a reflective network of other voices in the community and research settings – in which our voices, as well as our actions, became an inextricable part of it.

Collaborative and action research then became the key for understanding the issue of access to education in a more comprehensive perspective – from the ground up, and from the centre out. Through the act of listening to multiple covert stakes, we were able to hear a whole range of contradictory perspectives which have often gone unheard in simplistic representations of the "state" or "policies" as homogenous entities. The creation of a common and reflective space for these different voices – which were silent or alone before - was essential in order to highlight the blind and contradictory spots of practices surrounding access.

The partnership between community and institutional actors has been a significant, even if only a partial, first step that can potentially help to establish different and alternative forms of recognition. Yet, the understanding which emerged from our process did not lead to full translation at the level of the policies, and of the law. Undocumented children now have access but through an ambiguous channel. Our work is far from over. Making visible the invisible is a gradual and ongoing process when it comes to recognising, with different eyes, what was not seen before.

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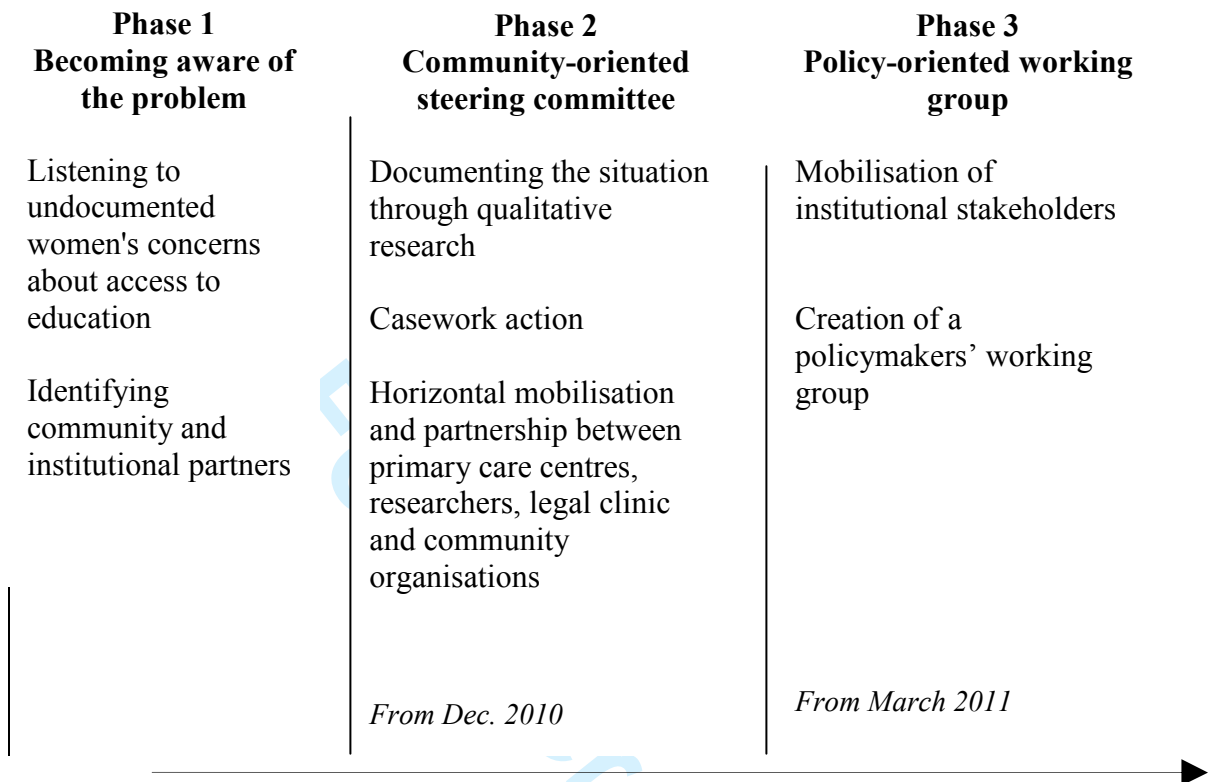
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Phase 1 **Becoming aware of** **the problem**	**Phase 2** **Community-oriented** **steering committee**	**Phase 3** **Policy-oriented working** **group**
Listening to undocumented women's concerns about access to education	Documenting the situation through qualitative research	Mobilisation of institutional stakeholders
Identifying community and institutional partners	Casework action Horizontal mobilisation and partnership between primary care centres, researchers, legal clinic and community organisations	Creation of a policymakers' working group
	From Dec. 2010	*From March 2011*

Figure 1: Map of the research process

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