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Education Preparation to Respond to the Needs of Homeless Children & Youth: Perceptions of School Personnel

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Running Head: EDUCATOR PREPARATION TO RESPOND TO HOMELESS CHILDREN

Educator Preparation to Respond to the Needs of Homeless Children and Youth:
Perceptions of School Personnel

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Abstract

Each year, 1.5 million children spend at least one night in a homeless situation (Public Broadcast Station, 2009). These students struggle to achieve academically with schooling that is inconsistent in both location and curriculum and living conditions that are not conducive to homework and study. This study examined educators' perceptions of homelessness and the academic and social needs of homeless students, as well as the preparation that teachers and other school personnel report that they have received in pre-service preparation programs and through professional development opportunities to address the unique needs of homeless children and youth. The project explored educator preparedness to respond to this population of students, in connection with federal legislation and professional recommendations on the issue. Throughout the course of this study, survey and interview data were collected from educators in four New England school districts, two of which are located in small suburban areas and the other two of which are larger, more urban districts. Survey data across all districts indicated that educators are confident in their roles as "mandated reporters." Despite this general awareness, respondents indicated much lower levels of knowledge about the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act, federal legislation that outlines schools' responsibilities regarding the support of students in homeless situations. Interview data indicated that educators perceive school leadership and communication between school administration, faculty and students as the most important factor in shaping schools' response to this unique population. Data collected in this study have been used to create an online guide that will provide resources to help educators more effectively respond to the needs of homeless students.

Educator Preparation to Respond to the Needs of Homeless Children and Youth: Perceptions of School Personnel

Dame Sheila McKechnie, a Scottish advocate for the homeless, once commented, “People who are homeless are not social inadequates. They are people without homes” (*The Times*, 2004, para. 15). Although her words seem nothing more than common sense, for many people, the word “homeless” is a loaded adjective, describing much more than simply a person without a home. Throughout history, civilizations around the world have condemned homeless individuals as “lazy,” “dirty,” or “burdens on society.” Beier & Ocobock (2008) offered a historical perspective on this issue, revealing that records show that leaders of the Greek and Roman empires viewed their unemployed subjects as “merely lazy” (p. 4). In the seventeenth century, authors of popular “rogue literature” used colorful language to portray the “rural unemployed” as “shiftless and lazy,” emphasizing the rather universal and timeless nature of this idea (p. 76).

Today, these perceptions continue to influence the way homelessness is addressed in the political arena and in the American educational system. According to a study released by the National Center on Family Homelessness in 2009, 1.5 million American children (1 in 50 children) experience homelessness each year (*CNN*, 2009, para. 1). The McKinney-Vento Act, revised in 2002, defines a homeless youth as any child who would not characterize his or her living situation as “in a home with a parent or legal guardian” (Fournier et al., 2009, p. 466). Although many homeless children attend school, their lives are often unstable, and their schooling is inconsistent. As these students move from district to district, they lack the structure and support necessary for a successful educational experience (Reganick, 1997). For these students to succeed academically despite their

difficult situations, it is important that teachers have some awareness of the challenges that the students face outside of school. Prior to entering the classroom, teachers and school personnel are trained to work with a diverse population of students, as this is a standard component of the curriculum of most teacher preparation programs (Hollins & Guzman, 2005). Hollins and Guzman highlighted the growing presence of “prejudice reduction” efforts in teacher preparation programs as an example of this trend towards preparing teachers to work with diverse populations. “Prejudice reduction” initiatives encourage teacher candidates to “develop positive attitudes toward racial, ethnic and cultural groups” (p. 485). Often, however, issues relating specifically to homeless children and youth are overlooked, and thus teachers begin their careers with little understanding of the challenges these students face or of the support that school personnel can offer (Swick, 1999). Moreover, infrequent professional development experiences focused on preparing current teachers to effectively support homeless students in their classrooms may further limit teachers’ abilities to work with these students.

In her 1990 book, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, democratic activist and political scholar Barbara Ehrenreich wrote, “The discovery of poverty at the beginning of the 1960s was something like the discovery of America almost 500 years earlier. In the case of these exotic terrains, plenty of people were on the site before the discoverers ever arrived” (Ehrenreich, 1989, p. 75). Homelessness and poverty are not new issues. For centuries, individuals and families in communities have struggled to maintain stable homes. Despite the longevity of this problem, many teacher preparation programs still fail to prepare future educators to be aware of and respond appropriately to this widespread issue. This study will examine the preparation and continuing professional

development that educators receive to respond to the needs of homeless children and youth in American public schools; the study centers around educators' own perceptions of homeless students' needs and the preparation that would help teachers to more effectively support these students.

Background

Students Without Homes

Research conducted over the past fifteen years has revealed that homeless students face significant challenges outside the classroom. Studies have suggested that these young people are at a greater risk for illicit drug use (Ennett, 1999), disordered weight behaviors (Fournier, 2009), and risky sexual behavior (Ennett, Bailey, & Federman, 1999) than their peers. Ennett and colleagues (1999) examined the prevalence of risky behaviors among homeless children, revealing that young homeless students were far more likely than their peers to share needles, use illicit drugs, consume excessive amounts of alcohol, and engage in risky "survival sex," especially when they lacked a social support system. In a related study, researchers defined "survival sex" as "the exchange of sex for shelter, food, drugs and money" and concluded that homeless children receiving support from and residing in shelters were far less likely to engage in these risky sexual behaviors than their counterparts living on the streets (Greene, Ennett, & Ringwalt, 1999, p. 1408).

While most research on homelessness and youth has focused on the social effects that living without a home have on children and young adults, Fournier and colleagues (2009) explored biological effects and discussed ways in which the emotional effects of homelessness have the potential to affect children's physical growth and development. Although researchers found no significant differences between the Body Mass Indices

(BMI) of homeless youth and their peers with stable home environments, there did appear to exist significant differences between the prevalence of “weight-related disorders” in homeless and non-homeless students. The researchers suggested that students living in homeless situations might use eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, to gain a sense of emotional and physical “control” over their food and their bodies (Fournier et al., 2009). Given the instability associated with homelessness (Reganick, 1997), this explanation seems quite logical and might also be used to explain the functional role that drug use and risky sexual behaviors play in the lives of homeless youth.

Programs facilitated by shelters and by school districts can help to lower incidences of these risky behaviors among homeless children and youth (Swick, 1999). Ennett et al. (1999) presented research revealing that students with large, strong support networks of friends and family are at less of a risk for engaging in these dangerous behaviors. Ottaway, King, and Erikson (2009) also studied the effects of support systems on outcomes for homeless students and argued that involvement in community art and writing programs helps homeless students develop a stronger sense of self-efficacy and a deeper sense of self-worth. Art programs also provide homeless students with connections to a community, which in turn widens their “social network,” potentially reducing their risk for participation in risky behaviors. In a very recent study, Ferguson, Kim, and McCory (2011) examined this concept of community involvement and suggested that providing students with an opportunity to take on leadership roles and engage in decision-making within schools, shelters, or larger communities allows young people in homeless situations to gain an important sense of control in their otherwise unstable lives.

Making Big Changes

With homelessness among children and youth increasing rapidly in the 1980s and 1990s and the development of an increasingly accepted understanding of the risks associated with childhood homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program was implemented and served as a component of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act first passed in the late 1980s (Cunningham, Harwood, & Hall, 2010). This program was a reaction to studies showing that “residential instability is associated with poor academic outcomes among children,” and proponents of the Act aimed to “mitigate the effects of residential instability through the identification of homeless children in schools and the provisions of [additional support] services” (p. 1). The Act required the appointment of a homeless student liaison in every American school district and suggested that this individual would work with families and students facing homelessness to provide them with the support necessary to allow students full participation in academic and social opportunities at school (). Although some school districts have appointed an individual to this position, it is not clear from the literature that the requirements set forth by the McKinney-Vento Act are enforced in every school district (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). While documents providing suggestions for what could be done exist, few published studies reveal instances of actual implementation of supports for homeless students, and further research is needed to determine the extent to which school districts comply with the provisions laid out by the McKinney-Vento Act. Over the past fifteen years, homeless students have gained recognition as a population in need in the American public school system, and research has revealed the risks facing homeless youth and the critical nature of social support systems in these students’ lives. The

implementation of school-based collaborative systems intended to provide homeless students with social, emotional and academic support seems a logical and necessary reaction to these studies.

Making Smaller Changes: A System of Collaborative Supports

In an analysis of homeless student support systems, Miller (2009) asserted that, although the 2002 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act further defined the school's role in supporting homeless students and responding to their unique needs, no one institution is solely responsible for providing support to these students. Rather, he suggested, the problems facing these students are multidimensional and, accordingly, require the services of multiple institutional structural supports. Miller highlighted some of these structures, citing the selected roles of school district homeless liaisons, school teachers, other school personnel, homeless shelter staff, and local, state and federal advocates and suggesting that each organization and individual is responsible for a different, and very specific, aspect of homeless students' support. The author went on to discuss the potential challenges associated with facilitating the collaboration of these interdisciplinary support structures and suggested that a boundary-spanning leadership approach is necessary to ensure effective inter-organizational collaboration.

Although Miller (2009) argued that teachers alone cannot be responsible for providing homeless students with the support that they need, researchers agree that teachers should play an integral role in supporting students who are experiencing homelessness (Ennett et al., 1999; Swick, 1999). Preservice teacher preparation programs and professional development programs for practicing teachers address issues of diversity in many different ways, but all endeavor to ensure that teachers leave personal prejudices

outside the classroom. Powers-Costello & Swick (2008) suggested that using a social justice framework to promote teacher understanding of the contexts of student homelessness and the unique needs of homeless students and families might enable teachers to move beyond their personal beliefs and ensure that their own biases do not affect their behavior towards students facing challenges outside of school. The approach encourages teachers to view their interactions with homeless students as instances of working “with” the students and their families and not “on” them, as if they were some kind of problem or project to be solved (p. 243).

Although teachers make an effort to leave their prejudices outside the classroom, it can be difficult to approach teaching with absolutely no biases. Ottaway et al. (2009) examined the ways in which the perceptions of society and the perceptions of teachers can affect homeless youth. Ottaway and her colleagues revealed that 40% of homeless students surveyed in the Los Angeles area reported that they have been diagnosed with mental illness, and nearly half of these young people reported that they have experienced physical or sexual abuse at the hands of close family members or other trusted adults. With these histories of abuse, homeless students need adults who will provide support, rather than further prejudice. One young woman commented on the effect that prejudices have on her, writing an emotional plea for recognition as a human being:

“...To the new beginning the streets provide me with... To the escape from the sexual, emotional, physical and mental...abuse aside from what I suffer from the likes of you... Who fail to recognize I am a person, just like you... Without the business suit and 300 dollar shoes... Listen... Unless there was something I missed... It’s not possible for one to be more human than someone else... So you may think

you are better than me... But biologically we are the same” (Ottaway et al., 2009, p. 22).

Powers-Costello and Swick (2008) examined the same types of prejudices to which this young woman refers and suggested that traditional school culture plays a significant role in shaping teachers’ perceptions of and responses to homeless students. They argued that because teachers and administrators typically aim to build a school environment that creates “order for the group,” individual students’ needs are sometimes inadvertently neglected (p. 243). Homeless students often require much more significant support systems than the typical student; thus, this group focus sometimes fails to address their unique and highly individual needs.

What Can Teachers Do?

Although a thorough search of relevant literature reveals that few empirical studies have been conducted to examine the roles that teachers currently play in homeless student support systems, some publications have provided guidance about how teachers and administrators can work together to further support their students without stable homes. Sanacore (1995) suggested that a school principal and interested faculty should initiate professional development programs designed to familiarize teachers with their important role in the homeless student advocacy system. The author further proposed that teachers and other school personnel should have opportunities to learn about the challenges homeless students face and might be encouraged to visit homeless shelters and meet with homeless advocates in order to develop a more personal understanding of their students’ situations.

Sanacore (1995) emphasized the idea that no single faculty member or department can effectively provide homeless students with all of the support that they need. Rather, he suggested that all school personnel, not just those in traditional “support” positions (like social workers and school psychologists, for example), must work together to create an environment that meets the academic, social, and emotional needs of homeless students. Sanacore also stressed the importance of professional development programs designed to provide teachers with the knowledge to recognize issues homeless students are facing and with the resources to support this special population within the school community. A guide published by the National Forum on Educational Statistics (2010) provided an additional perspective on the roles that teachers can play in support of students “in crisis” (p. 2). The guide highlighted the issues surrounding transfer of student data from school to school for students who are transient or “in transition” and suggested that teachers should make an effort to learn about students’ lives outside of school and administrators should encourage teachers to seek out student data.

Looking Ahead: More Changes, Big & Small

Current research suggests that homeless youth face significant physical, social and academic challenges. Although few studies have empirically examined the preparation that teachers currently receive to address the needs of homeless students, experts have emphasized that there is a great deal that teachers can and should do to support this special population of students. Without preservice preparation and continued professional development, however, teachers will not be ready to address the issues homeless students face and to provide them with the support and structure that are so critical for their success.

Methods

For this study, researchers collected survey and interview data from teachers and other school personnel in four New England schools. Two of the schools serve students in grades 9-12 (enrollment totals 2000 students [School B] and 1000 students [School D]) and are located in urban districts. Schools A and C are located in suburban districts with enrollment totals of 600 students and 500 students, respectively. School C serves students in grades 7-12, while School D serves students grades K-8. Table 1 shows details on the number of students reported to be living in a homeless situation in 2009-2010 (the most recent data available from the State Department of Education) for each of the districts in which these students are housed.

Table 1

Number of Students Reported Living in a Homeless Situation in Each District, 2009-2010

District	Number of Students in a Homeless Situation
A	0
B	4
C	1
D	30

Note. Data reported on the State Department of Education website are district data; it is unknown whether these students attended the specific schools involved in this study or other schools in each district.

In preparation for this project, we met with the Special Education coordinator and homelessness support liaison in one of the urban districts, along with the school system's Curriculum Coordinator and the Homeless Family Support Worker. The homelessness support liaison shared that, just between the months of September and November 2010,

nearly seventy-five students facing homelessness were identified in the district. He emphasized that although the district actively works to prepare guidance counselors, social workers, and school psychologists to identify the signs of homelessness and ensure that students are receiving adequate support, teachers have not yet received any professional development on the issue from the school district.

Given the background information discussed and the initial feedback from the school district noted above, the following research questions were developed for the study:

1. How do educators perceive the needs of and services for students in homeless situations?
2. How knowledgeable do educators feel themselves to be about the needs of homeless students and their responsibility to them as educators?

Sample

Surveys were administered in three schools, and 105 individuals participated, including teachers, school support personnel, and administrators (Table 2). Participants represented a wide range of educational backgrounds and levels of experience (Table 3). Interviews were conducted in two districts, and three individuals participated. In School B, we interviewed the Coordinator of English Language Learner Instruction. This participant had over thirty years of teaching experience and had worked directly with many students in homeless situations throughout her teaching career. In School D, we interviewed the district's Homeless Family Support Worker and the Director of No Child Left Behind and Supplemental Services, both of whom had worked with students in homeless situations in classrooms and through involvement in community organizations for more than two decades.

Table 2

Positions of Participants

School Position	Frequency
Administrator	3
Teacher	73
School Support Personnel	10
Other	1

Note: Some participants chose not to respond to this question.

Table 3

Professional Experience of Participants

Years of Professional Experience in Education	Frequency
1-5 Years	21
6-10 Years	18
11-15 Years	21
16-20 Years	14
21+ Years	31

Figure 3: Range of professional experiences in education (including current school year) of survey participants.

Instruments

The study instruments included a 37-item, Likert scale survey and an interview protocol, both developed by the researcher to reflect key themes in the literature and feedback from the school district. The survey questions explored three main areas: (a) general attitudes towards homeless individuals, (b) attitudes towards homeless students

and (c) knowledge about common causes of homelessness and legislation regarding schools' responsibilities for supporting homeless students. The survey items were reviewed for content validation by 4 educational experts, and items were adjusted or revised based on feedback. The total survey showed a moderate internal consistency of $\alpha = 0.71$; the three areas identified above did not hold as individual subscales, so only total scale scores and some item scores were used in the analyses.

The interview questions (a) further explored the awareness of school personnel about issues homeless students face in schools and appropriate responses and interventions and (b) examined what school personnel feel could be done to assist them in recognizing and supporting these students.

Procedures

Surveys were distributed in three of the four schools, and all teachers and school personnel in each school were invited to participate. School B chose to participate only in the interview component of the study. Surveys were distributed at faculty meetings and were placed in faculty mailboxes. Survey data were analyzed for descriptive results using SPSS. Given the relatively low reliability of the overall survey, few general conclusions across the content were drawn; rather, selected specific items were selected for focus using descriptive statistics.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with personnel at two of the four schools.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and then the interview transcripts were analyzed for emerging themes within and across individual responses. Because of the limited number of interviews, minimal coding was done on the interview data; descriptive

comments from interviews are reported here to support and expand upon other findings.

Results

We conducted this study in an effort to examine educator perceptions of the needs of and services available for students in homeless situations. We also sought to explore preparation and professional development that teachers receive related to the needs of this unique population.

The overall mean for the survey was 3.32 (SD = 0.26) on a 1-5 scale, indicating generally neutral or uncertain responses with limited variability. Item means for the knowledge-related items are presented in Table 4.

Table 4

Survey Item Means

	N	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q2: Drug abuse and addiction are primary causes of homelessness.	105	2.53	.867
Q9: I know how to start the process of filing a report with the Department of Children and Families in the case of a concern of a child's safety.	105	3.61	1.221
Q11: I can recognize indicators of homelessness in a student.	102	3.09	.857
Q13: I know which of my students are facing homelessness.	104	2.62	.969
Q16: I am aware of responsibilities as a "Mandated Reporter" under the Connecticut General Statutes.	105	4.26	.821
Q18: I am familiar with the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act.	103	1.81	.991

Q20: Teachers in this school have a good understanding about children’s lives outside of school.	102	3.73	.760
Q23: I know enough about my students’ lives outside of school to work with them effectively.	104	2.28	.717
Q24: I know how to help a homeless student.	103	3.43	.680
Q26: Foster children are not protected by the same legislation as children who are homeless.	104	4.05	.918
Q27*: I know whom I can talk to if I have concerns about a student’s situation outside of school.	104	4.12	.664
Q31*: Homeless students are less concerned about weight and body image than other students.	103	3.75	.637
Q36: Homeless students tend to need special education services.	103	2.85	.879
Q37: Mental Illness is a primary cause of homelessness.	102	3.63	.843

Note. All items marked with an * have been reverse-scored.

Two specific questions were examined to explore respondents’ awareness of key information relevant to the topic of homeless children and youth. Survey respondents across all districts reported awareness of their responsibilities as “mandated reporters,” and indicated the level to which they felt knowledgeable about the McKinney-Vento Act. As Table 5 indicates, participants across all districts indicated much lower levels of knowledge about McKinney-Vento than about their responsibilities as mandated reporters.

Table 5

Mean Responses to Mandated Reporter and McKinney-Vento Items

District	N	Mandated Reporter Mean (SD)	McKinney-Vento Mean (SD)
A	18	4.56 (.51)	2.11 (1.28)

B	65	4.15 (.92)	1.81 (.90)
C	22	4.32 (.65)	1.55 (.96)

Note. Higher scores indicate greater reported awareness (scale of 1-5).

Descriptive statistics indicated higher knowledge about the McKinney-Vento Act in District A than in the other two districts, though an analysis of variance (ANOVA) demonstrated that the differences were not significant. State Department of Education data indicate, however, that District A reports the least number of homeless students of the districts in the study.

Interview data from both school districts B and D indicated that educators perceive school leadership and communication between students, faculty and administrators as the most important factor in shaping educators' awareness of and ability to respond to the needs of homeless students. Participant 3 (School B) addressed the challenges her school was facing under the leadership of an interim principal and commented,

We're working on a school climate plan [designed to strengthen communication between students, teachers and administrators], and I think the fact that every kid has an adult in the building who they can really trust is very important. And so I think we're trying to get to that point where there's somebody, whether it be a classroom teacher or a gym teacher, just somebody that they see everyday. We're really trying to connect every kid with an adult in the building.

At the time this study took place, School D was undergoing significant administrative transitions at the school and district level and the district was currently under state control, as the district sought to reestablish strong leadership. Homelessness is a significant issue within this district and, in past years, the number of students in homeless

situations that the district is aware of by the end of the school year has reached 140. Despite the leadership challenges facing this district, the district recognizes the prevalence of homelessness among students in the district and makes a significant effort to provide frequent professional development on this issue:

Every year we provide some kind of training or information sheets or we come and talk to the staff whether it's teachers, bus drivers, social workers, nurses – we try to keep the whole issue of homelessness in front of them so that they will refer [students who might be living in a homeless situation to the district-level support program] when it's necessary (Participant 1).

In District B, Participant 3 highlighted that fact that teachers and other school personnel are willing to help, but often, they simply do not know how. “I’ve never had a teacher react negatively. Usually they’ll go out of their way to make specific arrangements for students in need, but sometimes they just don’t know.”

Discussion

This study explored educators’ perceptions surrounding the needs of homeless students. Participants represented a diverse array of personal and professional backgrounds, and the four school districts involved in the study are very different in size and demographics. Despite this diversity across participants and districts, we noticed fairly consistent trends in some participant responses. Most teachers report that they recognize their role as “mandated reporters.” In general, the “mandated reporter” role is designed to encourage teachers to be aware of situations in their students’ lives outside of school. Homelessness, although certainly not directly correlated with abuse or neglect, can create a challenging and often unstable situation for students outside of the classroom. Despite this

awareness, most of the educators in this study reported limited awareness of the signs associated with identifying children and youth in homeless situations. Participants also reported that they have received little or no preparation or professional development focused on addressing the needs of homeless students and reported that they are unaware of schools' responsibilities around the needs of this population. Powers-Costello (2008) stated that it is not clear from existing literature that the requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act are enforced in every American school district. The districts included in this study seem to confirm that public schools, large and small, urban and suburban, are perhaps not consistently meeting all requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act.

Teachers and other school personnel report that they are aware that they have a responsibility to report concerns about students' welfare in general, but, regardless of the pre-service preparation that they received, they consistently offered uncertain responses in terms of their ability to recognize signs of homelessness in students and to effectively support the unique needs of these individuals. It seems rather ironic that, while educators are mandated to "report" concerns they have about their students, many have not received the training necessary to prepare them on what a student in need might look like. One of the urban districts involved in this study reported that, in November (less than halfway through the school year), 86 students had already been identified as living in "homeless situations." Although fewer students were identified in the suburban districts, state data reported that, in the school years prior to this study, there were students living in homeless situations attending all four schools in this study. Even so, some teachers in all three districts surveyed reported that they were not sure whether there were homeless students in their schools. Across all districts, regardless of the number of homeless students

reported in the schools, teachers reported limited awareness of students' lives outside of school and of homeless students' unique academic and social needs.

We conducted interviews with individuals in positions in which they work directly with students in homeless situations within the school districts involved in this study. All interviewees emphasized the importance of strong school leadership in promoting support for and awareness of the needs of these students. At the time when the surveys were administered, District B was currently in the midst of significant transitions in leadership at both the school and district level and had been under the leadership of an interim superintendent for several months and an interim principal for over a year. District D was also undergoing significant district-wide leadership transitions at the time this study was conducted. These districts, which also happened to be the districts reporting the highest populations of enrolled homeless students, reflect the importance of communication between teachers and administrators in providing effective support to homeless students.

In these larger districts, teachers report that they are not consistently aware of situations in their students' lives outside of school. In District A, the smallest district surveyed and the district with the fewest number of enrolled students living in homeless situations, teachers reported the greatest awareness of their role of mandated reporters and also indicated that more teachers in that district are aware of school and teacher legal responsibilities in supporting homeless students than in the other districts. Thus, we suggest that, especially in large school districts, effective leadership and strong communication between teachers, school support personnel, administrators, and families is critical if the schools are to provide effective support to students in homeless situations. Too often, school faculty members simply are not aware of the challenges some of their

students are facing outside of their classrooms. Teachers' understandable focus on academics and the mounting pressure to raise students' standardized test scores sometimes clouds educators' awareness of students' lives outside of school. Teachers in School B recognized this challenge and, at the time this study was conducted, were working to institute an "advisory block." This program would involve direct teacher-student interactions and counseling for a full block period one day each month. School personnel believed that this would give teachers the opportunity to get to know some of their students on a more personal level and might make it easier for them to better understand and respond to the students' nonacademic needs. A program like this would require the full support of school administration, but, as School B was undergoing significant leadership changes at the time of this study, teachers were struggling to gain support for this program. "Years ago, we had advisory here and I've worked in other districts where they've allowed an advisory program to last more than a school year to make both adults and students accountable for the time they have in there. Put those structures in place, a formal plan.... Everybody says it doesn't work, but I think if it's there and you have to go, then you tweak it until it works."

District D, which, for the past four years, has received a federally-funded McKinney-Vento grant to support their efforts to work with homeless students, provides a unique case study of a district in which support for homeless students has been made a clear priority. We interviewed the "Homeless Support Worker" for the district, whose position involves facilitating communication between homeless families, community support services and shelters and the school district and coordinating programs designed to support these families. She emphasized that the schools, families, and outside support

organizations all enter the process with the same goal – “to ensure that each student gets an equal education,” despite their potentially difficult home situations. This unique collaborative support program seems to offer the best chance for students in homeless situations to succeed. The students receive individualized social and academic support, and the district’s food services department even provides students in homeless situations with backpacks filled with food to ensure that the students do not go without food on days when school is not in session. The direct line of communication between the school and parents is incredibly important. As one of the interviewees mentioned, far too often, parents are not comfortable approaching school personnel and feel ashamed to admit that their children are living in a homeless situation, and so they avoid contact with the school district altogether. Providing the parents with opportunities to participate in their students’ academic lives and creating strong links between outside support organizations and school districts fosters a supportive environment in which students in homeless situations will receive the support that they need to succeed academically and socially.

Limitations

This study addressed the concept of homelessness and explored teachers’ perceptions of homeless students and of homeless individuals in general. Participation in all aspects of the study was completely voluntary, and one district chose not to participate in the survey component of the study. The survey instrument did not function as expected, as data revealed that participants were unsure about several items or were unwilling to answer the questions for personal or professional reasons. Due to the nature of and subjects addressed by the survey questions, the survey offered the potential for respondents to offer socially acceptable responses to questions, particularly those

addressing individuals' personal perceptions surrounding homeless individuals. Some participants also chose to avoid questions that addressed these personal perceptions. The relatively small sample size of participants involved in this both the survey and interview components of this study also served as a limitation.

Future research on this issue might examine teachers' experiences with professional development focused on the needs of children and youth more directly, and might also involve more extensive interviews about this complex issue and educators' experiences related to it. In addition, future research might explore the effects of particular professional development efforts and educator resources on teachers' reported understanding of students' needs and their own potential to support students living in homeless situations.

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