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# Moving From the Streets to the Classroom: Understanding the Teacher's Role for Creating a Robust Education for Homeless Youth in the Classroom

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Moving From The Streets To The Classroom: Understanding The Teacher's Role For Creating A  
Robust Education For Homeless Youth In The Classroom

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## **Abstract**

Homeless youth within the educational system have been neglected through the lack of teacher education. Teachers have been misdirected through their education in the Bachelor of Arts degree and the teacher credential program. They are learning how to teach to an “ideal” classroom with students who are always ready and mentally prepared to learn. Teachers are not made aware that every student brings a different background to the classroom, and how that background could affect their academics and behavior. Teachers are unaware on how to deal with issues such as homelessness in the classroom, and that the students’ situations outside of the school grounds could be very traumatic. This has led to a deficiency for a robust education that homeless youth deserve. Some deficiencies that results are students’ experience academic struggle, lack of interest in school, and behavioral issues. The experience of homelessness is considered traumatic due to the effect on emotional stress, emotional well-being, lack of control of environment, and feeling helpless. Research for this paper was conducted by interviewing four teachers and two principals who have dealt with homelessness in the educational system. Through the knowledge that was gained, I created a trauma informed curriculum for the Liberal Studies B.A that enables education to teachers on how to adjust to homeless youth in the classroom. They will learn through the curriculum how to see signs of trauma in a child; they will learn why that matters, and they will learn how to assist a child in that situation through resources and accommodating schoolwork.

## **Introduction**

Within the educational system there are a wide array of students. There are growing rates of homelessness in the U.S. A high amount of homelessness means a large amount of homeless students in the educational system. In the Pajaro Valley Unified School District in the Watsonville Area, there are around 3,00 students who are considered in transition or homeless. This shows that homelessness directly affects the local communities, which should be important to the educational system and society.

Teachers are looked at as the educators to our future society. Teachers are educated on how to create lesson plans, how to teach subjects, and how to manage a classroom. However, there is no point in a teacher's education where they are taught or prepared on how to approach teaching a child who is homeless. This brings in the overarching research question of this paper is why must teachers be educated on how to respond empathetically and critically to homeless youth? There is research that explains how teachers affect children's education. Teachers make an impact on students' live whether they intend to or not, and the impact they make can either be negative or positive.

Homeless youth experience trauma in result of their experience of homelessness. They experience a lack of control and helplessness. If teachers are not educated on how to approach, work with, and accommodate for the trauma that homeless experience, then homeless students could possibly struggle with academic advancement.

This topic is interesting for me on a personal level. My aunt and cousins experienced homelessness for about 8 years. They bounced around from home to home, hotels, and a homeless shelter. They were eligible for students in transition and with great struggle were able to remain at their original school. However, just because they were able to remain at their

original school does not mean their experience was good. It was through my family that I saw a negative perspective on the lack of teacher preparation in reference to homelessness.

One of my cousins, due to her experience with teachers, decided to drop out of high school. She had explained that staying focused in school was sometimes difficult because she was hungry, tired, or worried for the safety of the family. Homework was also difficult for her because it was sometimes hard to find a place to study, and sometimes the homework would be lost due to the constant moving. Big projects were hard to do sometimes because supplies weren't accessible, and so she'd fail the assignment because she didn't want to admit she couldn't afford the supplies. The teachers she did speak to were not empathetic and essentially claimed it wasn't their problem. She had to either do the work or fail and have to repeat the class or even the grade. This resulted in my cousin being further discouraged, and she decided to drop out. She later decided to return to school and went to an alternative school instead. She eventually finished high school, but she never went back to the public high school. The teachers were not prepared on how to deal with such situations, and it resulted in my cousin being negatively affected in educational reference.

My other younger cousin was also in the same situation (homelessness); she got close to giving up due to similar circumstances. But she met a teacher who was very empathetic to her situation. The teacher worked with my cousin by tutoring, accommodating assignments, and showing her the resources she could use. My cousin had started to make a 180-degree turn for her education; and had high hopes of graduating high school. Unfortunately, my cousin died in a car accident in 2014 and never got the chance to graduate. I'm writing this paper in memory of her, to hopefully prepare teachers to help homeless students like her achieve academic success.

To get more teachers out there to motivate homeless, and try to understand their situations to help them progress as individuals academically and socially.

The goal for this research paper is to show how homeless youth experience trauma, and how teachers can assist them in the educational system by being knowledgeable of trauma and its affects on education. Teacher education requires for teachers to be prepared on how to teach. However, teachers are set up for failure in dealing with homeless youth because they are not prepared properly. This paper will design a curriculum to better prepare teachers on how to create an opportunity for a better education for homeless youth. Preparing teachers to adjust, accommodate, and be empathetic to homeless youth will do this.

### **Homelessness and Youth**

Within the educational system there are different children, each coming from a different ethnicity, social class, and child rearing. Homelessness affects different ethnicities, classes, and families. Homelessness has become a national tragedy that affects individuals and families throughout the United States, including increasing numbers of women and children (Goodman). Homelessness means lack of a regular and adequate residence (Mckenzie-Mohr). In addition, children are considered homeless if they are migratory or temporarily doubled up in the home of others. "Doubling up" is staying with relatives or friends due to eviction or other imposed situations.

There are different occasions in which lead families to homelessness such as when a parent loses a job and the family can't pay rent, or after a natural disaster destroys the home. Homelessness may last a few days or a lifetime. Some children are born into it while others experience it for the first time during their school years (Powers-Costello).

In the U.S there are different social classes. Lareau (2011) stated in her book Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life that, “Many Americans believe that this country is fundamentally open. Many Americans believe in the American Dream. This perspective rejects the notion that parents’ social location systemically shapes children’s life experiences and outcomes.” Society essentially places blame on people’s work ethics for what social class they end up in. Americans believe that if one works “hard” one can get out of their social class. But what is not being acknowledged is what about the children? Children are experiencing the social class their parents are in, what can they do? It was said in the book that, “I value a categorical analysis, wherein families are grouped into poor, working class, and middle class” (Lareau 2011). The key is that children are bound by their parents’ actions, whether they (the parents) are at fault or not. Children are essentially stuck in homelessness with no opportunity of getting out of it unless their entire family is able to do so. As Lareau stated, society places blame on people’s ethics for the social class or situations they are in. This harmful assessment gives society an improper view on the homeless, and how they ended up in that situation.

Research done by Guarino (2013) claimed that Families with children comprise 34% of the homeless population and that this number is rising. There is a calculated over 1.35 million children and youth experiencing homelessness in U.S each year (Julianelle 2003), these results mean that one in every 50 children experience homelessness (Guarino 2013). With such high ratios it seems almost inevitable that teachers will be exposed to homelessness within the classroom environment.

The home lives are unstable due to moving and not having a stable house to live in. Some places in which they move to are emergency shelters, motels, hotels, sharing with friends or relatives, or inadequate buildings like abandoned buildings (Julianelle and Foscarinis 2003).

Typically, the transition from being housed to being homeless lasts days, weeks, months, or even longer. Based on research by Goodman (1991) it was claimed that most people living on the street or in shelters have already spent time living with friends or relatives and may have experienced previous episodes of homelessness. This constant moving affects children and families in different ways.

Research done by Rafferty and Shinn (1991) found that families in shelters were routinely bounced from one facility to another. Also in most shelters privacy is lost and space for negotiating homework activities is minimal (Powers-Costello 2011). Homeless children and their families face many challenges: finding adequate shelter, acquiring needed life skills, finding decent paying jobs, getting needed transportation, accessing social services, and gaining other needed support resources. These situations lead to compounding stress for children who are already struggling to master their environments. Children also tend to worry that they will have no place to live and no place to sleep (Guarino 2013).

Julianelle and Foscarinis (2003) did research that found that parents experiencing homelessness often must spend all their waking hours tending to daily survival needs such as food, shelter, laundry, hygiene, and searching for employment. These demands can limit a parent's ability to identify his/her children's educational needs and communicate with teachers or counselors.

The constant moving affects health problems, hunger and poor nutrition, developmental delays, psychological problems, and educational underachievement (Rafferty and Shinn 1991). Among the different health problems it was explored in research by Rafferty and Shinn (1991) that homeless children compared to normal housed children had poorer attention, more trouble sleeping, delayed speech, and were more likely to exhibit aggressive behaviors, shyness, and



withdrawal. In the research by Guarino (2013) it shows there are also possibilities of acute illness, ear infections, coughs, stomach problems, asthma, visual problems, and neurological deficits. These different issues are sure to affect their education. Children sometimes have a hard time focusing on schoolwork, but adding issues of illness into the mix make it harder for students to focus. Illnesses are also another contributor to children not being able to sit still in class, or complete homework.

Homeless children also tend to have poor nutrition due to lack of money, which results in an inadequate amount of meals. A lack of food is another distraction for children within the classroom, because food is an essential piece of a healthy and focused child. They may be highly distractible, unable to play for more than a few minutes, or their play may be constricted and repetitive (Guarino 2013).

It is argued that homelessness is itself a risk factor for emotional disorders. The act of becoming homeless may cause psychological trauma (Goodman 1991). Children and families leave their homes, neighbors, possibly family members, and their sense of being. They lose their sense of identity when they are essentially forced to vacate their “normal” life, or the lives they are accustomed to. Changes in residences, schools, and services; loss of possessions, disruptions in social networks, and exposure to extreme hardship affect children in their health, education, and family life (Rafferty 1995). Children experience continuous stressors throughout their experience as homeless. These stressors can lead to academic difficulties, and result in academic struggles due to that strong emotional, physical, and social behaviors are required in the classroom.

There are barriers for children in their education opportunities. Some of the hindrances that homeless children experience are issues of residency, guardianship, immunization, school

records, and transportation (Rafferty 1995). In reference to homeless youth experiencing issues with proof of residency, many students are restricted from attending their current school or the school near their temporary location. An example of this is within a local district is in Santa Cruz City School District. On the school website it states that the documents required to enroll are a birth certificate, up-to-date immunization, and two proofs of residency such as PG&E, mortgage, lease or rental agreement, or SC Municipal Utilities bill (Gault Elementary). This shows that schools are essentially impeding on homeless youth educational opportunities by not allowing them to enroll in school unless they have a permanent residence. This is discrimination against homeless because they (the school) are giving off the appearance that they don't want homeless in their school. There will be further discussion on education and homelessness later in this paper.

### **Homeless Youth and Trauma**

Homeless youth are connected with trauma for several reasons. Trauma is said to occur due to anything that involves a threat to emotional and physical well-being, an overwhelming experience, fear of lack of control, helplessness, or an event that causes someone to view themselves or the world in a different way (Guarino 2013). The homeless experience all of the above through their experience as homeless. They experience trauma through the loss of their home, safety, and sense of self. All these events lead to children having altered behaviors, coping, and relationship habits. Homeless youth feel a continuous sense of trauma being in poverty and unstable environments.

Homeless families feel a lack of control by living in a shelter. Guarino (2013) research declares that in a one year timespan, 97% of children who are homeless move up to three times, 40% attend two different schools, and 28% attend three or more different schools. With so many

moves and changes, children experience trauma through a lack of stability. Homeless children do not have control over their situation so this results in them feeling helpless.

The human brain responds to trauma as fight, flee, or freeze in order to cope with their trauma. Traumatic stress can affect the sense of self, perception of society, and a sense of safety (Noll 2003). Based on research by Guarino (2013) it explains how trauma has an impact on thinking, planning, problem solving, physical state, emotional state, and trust of relationships. These kinds of impacts surely affect the education of homeless youth because actions like thinking and problem solving are essential for academic growth and prosperity.

Rafferty and Shinn (1991) explained that some homeless youth experience developmental delays, language disabilities, attention issues, and issues with peers. The combination of trauma implications and homelessness essentially results in homeless youth being at a large disadvantage. They are put in a position where they experience repercussions from homelessness in emotional, physical, and educational situations.

It is critical for homeless youth to be in a physical and emotional safe area. The classroom is the perfect opportunity to make homeless youth feel safe both in a physical and emotional way. They need to be protected, comforted, in control, listened to, and reassured (Guarino 2013). This sense of emotional safety allows the children to be comfortable in despite their traumatic state. However, unfortunately with a lack of teachers being trauma-informed, children's natural response of fight, flee, or freeze are interpreted as bad behavior.

Guarino (2013) claims that the trauma responses could be confused with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, bipolar disorder, or reactive-attachment disorder. Students responding to those natural responses could be labeled as misbehaving or as the "bad" kid with the likeness to the disorders. Homeless youth already experience trauma with their label as homeless, adding

another label such as "the bad kid," could possibly stick with the students' academics and sense of self for a long time.

In Trauma-Informed practices it is essential for triggers to be made aware so that children can be assisted. Some potential triggers are loud noises, hand or body gestures, fighting, confusion, change in routine, feelings of anger or sadness, and any other experience that reminds them of the traumatic event. It's important for educators to be knowledgeable in these triggers because awareness is key to understanding (Guarino 2013). It's also important for educators to be knowledgeable because it would be wrong to label a child as "bad," especially without knowing the back-story.

There has been proved success of trauma-informed practices. In Ingram (2012) there has been proof of improvement in academic achievement, teacher self-confidence, and retention of teachers and students. There has also been a reduction in student behavioral outbursts, stress for staff and students, and a reduction in the need for special educational services. Ingram (2012) explains that trauma informed care goes against the idea that children are at fault for there misbehavior and instead look at the events that led up to that. This type of practice could be a new beginning for teachers and students. Students of other traumatic events such as loss of a family member, divorcing parents, being in foster care, or other traumatic events will also benefit from a trauma-informed practice within the educational system. Teachers will have a better understanding of the students and will be more aware of external influences on the students' academic progress.

### **Teachers, Education, and Homeless Youth**

It is expected for families that are in shelters that shelters must control light and noise so that children can sleep and do homework, and enough space so that young children can explore

their environments (Rafferty and Shinn 1991). While it assumed and expected by law that shelters are to make an area comfortable for children to sleep and do homework, this is not always the case. Shelters are sometimes too noisy and overcrowded to properly accommodate for study time. It's been shown in the previous research that homelessness and lack of stable home affects children's education. But why does that matter in the educational forum? Where's the injustice? Well, most homeless students rely on school to help bring stability to their lives and to treat them like they matter (Cox 2000).

Some factors that affect homeless children in education are, poor school attendance, lack of adequate educational services, inadequate shelter conditions, and shelter instability. Research done by Cox (2000) claimed that homeless students are highly unlikely to have an opportunity for help with studies. So, it seems that it is essential that students have the opportunity to study and get help at school. It appears that school is an essential place for homeless children for not only educational purposes but for the stability they otherwise do not have the opportunity of. Homeless children, however, frequently confront stigmatization, insensitivity, and rejection by classmates and teachers (Rafferty 1995). The concept that homeless children experience insensitivity and rejection by classmates and teachers explores the idea that teachers are not adequately prepared to work with homeless students. Otherwise, students would not feel like their teachers are being insensitive or rejecting them.

Research done by Rafferty (1989 & 1995) in several studies claims that homeless children want to come to school more often than their permanently housed peers. This could be for a variety of reasons, but this emphasizes the idea that teachers make an influential impact on students. However, school personnel are not always informed of the educational rights of homeless children and youth. Homelessness is not a sufficient reason to separate students from

mainstream school environment. With homeless students being integrated in the mainstream culture it's crucial for teachers to comprehend every aspect of what a homeless student brings to the classroom.

The first step towards helping children in education was the McKinney Vento Act of 1987. It was stated that, "The Act authorizes funds for a comprehensive range of emergency food and shelter, housing, health and mental health care, education, for the homeless" (Rafferty and Rollins 1989). When the Act first began it was claimed to really push the ideals that, the idea of "equal" treatment relates to the objective that the homeless students get a relative opportunity within education as students with stable homes.

It is stated that through the McKinney Act the government is required to ensure homeless youth the same access to free appropriate public education and all other services. It claims that homeless youth are allowed to continue to attend their school of origin through the end of the school year regardless of where the family is temporarily staying. But as shown earlier, schools are seemingly not necessarily open to the idea of having homeless students in their school. A great aspect of the McKinney Act is that the best interest of the child is also taken into consideration, and the parent is respectfully regarded for the selection (Noll&Watkins 2003). With parents' input of where they believe their student will be the most successful, it gives the homeless family a sense of control that they otherwise don't have.

Despite the McKinney Act there was research from Rafferty (1995) that in 1994, 47% of 169 homeless children in Los Angeles County scored at or below the 10th percentile for children of the same age in the general population. Also in research done by Rafferty and Shinn (1991) it claimed that the percentages of homeless children scoring at or above grade level for grades 3<sup>rd</sup>, fourth, and fifth were 36%, 40%, and 41%, compared with 57%, 74%, and 68% for all children.

These numbers are significant for acknowledging that homeless children are scoring lower than normal “housed” peers. With such a high number of homeless youth scoring below their “housed” peers, it gives way to an educational gap.

If homeless youth were getting an education that accommodated to their needs, then they would possibly not be scoring below other students. There are also several studies that indicate that homeless students are less likely to be promoted at the end of the school year (Rafferty 1989). Students repeating years emphasizes that homeless students are again being put in a trauma inducing situation through experiencing a lack of control of environment, and feeling helpless. This only furthers trauma for homeless students instead of helping them, the educational system is further impeding on their academic opportunity and affecting them negatively in reference to their trauma.

Unfortunately, research done by Mandelsen (2015) states that the public education system is under-resourced to address this level of need. Families in homeless situations are at a higher risk for educational failure (Rafferty 2015). Assuming that students can push past the worry they feel, their trauma, and their lack of stability to do academic tasks in unrealistic.

Research by Powers-Costello (2011) explains that teachers are commonly seen as having an influential impact on students. This reiterates the idea that teachers’ interactions with homeless children can result in a better community between school and home life. Teachers’ perceptions and perspectives on homelessness can either positively or negatively affect the way they interact with homeless students. If they view them (the homeless) as lazy or irresponsible then this will in turn effect how they treat the homeless students. In order to be empathic with students, teachers have to reflect on their own perceptions, and acknowledge their opinions as either harmful or helpful.

Swick (1996) researched on the idea of a liaison for homeless students either through a teacher, principal, counselor, or even in the district. The liaison would work with local shelters and help mentor families to assist the families be successful in both life and academics. Also he explored the resources that teachers have such as district resources, tutoring systems, and further teacher education.

### **Teacher Education**

Research by Mckenzie-Mohr (2012) claims that it is essential for homeless students' lives and educational needs to be met. Through the research it is shown that students struggle academically, emotionally, and socially compared to other "housed" peers. Children need support by the people around them like teachers who can assist them in their academic struggles. Teachers need to be aware that homework, projects, or posters are sometimes difficult because students may not be able to afford the supplies to do it (Mckenzie-Mohr 2012). However, teachers are not taught how to offer alternatives, or why it's important to be empathic to students' lives outside of the classroom.

It was claimed in research by Rafferty (1995) that sensitivity and awareness training for school personnel was identified as a major need by 19 out of the 50 state educational agencies. It is essential that any adult in an educational environment such as: school teachers, bus drivers, support staff, administrators, and principals have the training and sensitivity they need to be empathetic and to provide a robust education to homeless youth. However, employees in the educational system were identified as needing improvement in their manner of dealing with homeless parents and their children (Rafferty 1995). Despite a claim like this, there is little to no evidence of teachers being trained in their time as students to better prepare them to be more sensitive and aware in their interactions with homeless or trauma-affected youth.



Teachers need an awareness of the dynamics of the homeless children's' lives. Teachers need enriching in their understanding of homeless children and families. This is done by engaging in experiences that deepens their sensitivity to the contextual elements that are pervasive in being homeless. Children who are homeless need teachers who are more than alert to their cognitive function (Swick 1996). This is reflected in understanding how homelessness affects children and how it affects their education. They also need to be aware of how shelters work and the obstacles students' face within the shelters to complete homework (Powers-Costello 2011). Understanding those obstacles could assist teachers in recognizing the cause of tardiness, lateness in assignment submission, and loss of motivation.

Currently the classes that are required for the Liberal Studies B.A at California State University of Monterey Bay do not converse issues of homelessness or trauma in the educational system. There are little to no examination of issues homeless youth endure or how to better understand their dynamics as homeless youth. The classes that could possibly relate to homelessness are: Schooling in Modern Society (LS277S), Culturally Relevant Literature for Children and Adolescents (LS390), Teaching for Social Change (LS380), and Diversity in Educational Settings (LS391). After personally taking most of these classes, not one directly deliberated on the topic of homelessness in the educational system.

Many of the classes discuss cultural and racial issues, but few touch on discrimination or social issues of homelessness. The two classes that could possibly touch on homelessness are LS391 or LS380. The course description of LS391 is that topics will be discussed of power, difference, discrimination, and privilege (Liberal Studies B.A). While homelessness could fall into the category of issues of privilege, there is no unit on homelessness or trauma in the educational system within the class.

The course LS380 helps students acquire the skills needed to implement change in their communities as educational professionals. Future educators gain the knowledge they need to integrate social change in the K-8 curriculum (Liberal Studies B.A). This class could be the first stepping-stone when attempting to introduce teachers to homeless youth in the educational system. However it doesn't elaborate further on how to assist homeless in the classroom, or how to accommodate students in those situations by possibly adjusting homework, assignments, or teaching methods while still maintaining academic goals.

### **Interviews**

Research for this paper was conducted by interviews. For the sake of confidentiality I have changed the names of the interviewees. I interviewed two principals who I will refer to as Principal A and Principal B. I also interviewed four teachers who will be referred to as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, Teacher 3, and Teacher 4. All the interviewees are within a local district; this was done to show how within the close communities how homeless youth are affected. Teacher 1 and 2 are teachers at Principal A's school, Teacher 4 is a teacher at Principal B's school and Teacher 3 works at a separate school than all of them. Through the knowledge gained in these interviews, it gives a better perspective on how educators need to be prepared. All the interviewees were asked the same questions. I had a few base questions, and allowed them to expand on those questions as we spoke. The base questions were:

1. What is your educational experience?
2. What is your knowledge of what is homeless? And what does it mean to you to be homeless?
3. Do you believe our educational system is or should be geared toward benefitting homeless students? Why or Why not?

4. Do you accommodate to adjust lessons for students in homeless situations or believe it is necessary? If so, how?
5. What has your experience been with homeless students in the educational system?
6. How did your education prepare you to work with students from different backgrounds such as homeless students?

*Question 1 Responses:* What is your educational experience?

This question was asked to get an idea of how much experience the different interviewees had. Teacher 1 had around 15-20 years experience in elementary education as a teacher for grades ranging from kindergarten to fourth grade. Teacher 1 has worked locally her entire life. Teacher 2 has worked in the educational system for almost 30 years. She has worked for the local communities for the duration of her career and has worked with grades from kindergarten to sixth grade. Teacher 3 is a first year teacher who just recently graduated from CSUMB with the teaching credential, and they are teaching 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. Teacher 4 has been a teacher for more than 20 years and is currently getting their certificate for T-K. Principal A was been around this area for the duration of his life. He worked as a teacher at both an elementary school level and junior high education. He has been the Principal at the school for the past 4 years. Principal B has been a principal for quite a few years now, before that he taught for a little while but likes the responsibility of administrator more.

*Question 2 Responses:* What is your knowledge of what is homeless? And what does it mean to you to be homeless?

Teacher 1 stated that she has had lots of students in transition throughout her career. She claimed that there was usually a 50/50 chance that she would know that the child was in transition from the beginning of the school year. Sometimes, that knowledge was simply

acquired as the year continued, and it was made through observation of behavioral, physical, and emotional evidence. Teacher 1's view on homeless is of families who are in a difficult part of their lives, and sometimes things happen no matter how hard we try to avoid it. She spoke very sympathetically about these situations. Teacher 2 claimed that she knows being homeless doesn't simply mean that they don't have a house, it could mean they live in a car, motel, or with a friend or family member. She stated however that being homeless does not mean not having a home, it means not having a house. She claimed some of the homeless students she had in previous years were very close with their family, and she claimed that those children had a home with their family; they simply didn't have a house. That's what it meant to be homeless for Teacher 2.

Teacher 3 guessed that homeless meant that a child did not have a stable home environment, and that it means not having the stability of a place to sleep. Teacher 4 (20+ years experience) claimed that she did not know what it meant to be homeless according to the district until recently. She claimed she thought it simply meant you didn't have a house, but realized recently that students in transition can include students that are living in cars, hotels, with a friends, or doubling up (sharing space). She claimed to have been shocked because she didn't realize all the situations in which a student could be considered homeless.

Principal A claimed that he learned about what it meant to be in transition around 5-6 years ago when he watched a presentation on Trauma-Informed Schools. This is where he learned about all the different ways students could be classified as homeless, and how it negatively affects their mental, physical, behavioral, social, and academic success. After that he began to research it more, and now has a good relationship with the district supervisor for students in transition. Principal B stated that there were a slightly large amount of students who

classified as students in transition within the school due to the demographics around the area, which is more in the direction of a poverty area.

*Question 3 Responses:* Do you believe our educational system is or should be geared toward benefitting homeless students? Why or Why not?

Teacher 1's response to this question was that it absolutely should be, but it is unfortunately not. She claims that while the district has enhanced their resources, there is still a long way to go, and many more resources are still needed such as teacher education and counselors for students. Teacher 2 and 3 had a similar response to Teacher 1, that it is not really geared, but that it should be to better assist homeless youth in their academics.

Principal A claimed it isn't really geared but the Trauma-Informed Practice is way of gearing it towards students who come from different backgrounds. He claimed it should enable more academic success, because a positive environment should reflect positively on the students. This is the practice that he implements within his school.

Principal B classified homeless, and homeless students as students who should be classified under Individualized Education Program (IEP). IEP is a program that meets individual needs; they are usually used for children in special education. Principal B claimed that it is the best opportunity for them to get the best education they deserve. I was not too happy with this answer, because it just seems like another way to push the homeless to the side instead of trying to find a solution. It also seems to be classifying them as needing to be removed from the mainstream classroom, and the research disagrees and states they should be in the mainstream system.

Teacher 4 believed that the educational system doesn't benefit or hurt homeless, but that they should make resources more available so teachers can know what to do in the case of a

homeless child in the classroom. Teacher 4 also believed that there should be more counselors on campus to benefit the students.

*Question 4 Responses:* Do you accommodate or adjust lessons for students in homeless situations or believe it is necessary? If so, how?

Principal A stated that he does accommodate and adjust for students who are homeless. He claims he understands that sometimes things go wrong. He is a believer in the concept that there are no bad kids, simply bad circumstances that led to the child feeling and acting a certain way. He said he tries to pay attention to the students from the school and really try to see what he can do to help them feel more comfortable in the learning environment.

Teacher 1 states that she does her best to accommodate based on the individual needs of the child. She gave an example of a boy in her class who has not submitted any homework all year, but she knows he is learning because he does his classwork completely and successfully. She explained that he knows the information, but “I don’t think he has a good place to do his schoolwork because he is in transition.” I do not punish him for it, I sometimes help him work on it during class and he almost always gets the answers right.

Teacher 2 explained that she accommodates for students who are homeless because every person is different. She stated, “What future teachers need to understand is you can plan, and plan, and plan a lesson, but what you need to understand is that every child is different. And sometimes you need to adjust your plan.” I felt like this was a great way of describing that every classroom, and every situation is different, so why aren’t teachers exposed to that during their education. Teacher 3 claimed that she has had to adjust schoolwork for some students based on their situations, she doesn’t change their academic expectations; she simply gives them a different opportunity to achieve it.

Principal B claims that there shouldn't be too much of an adjustment because there still needs to be academic goals and academic success. He explained that lowering the expectations makes it so kids are less successful because they could possibly aim "low" for themselves. This seemed a little ignorant to believe that adjusting or accommodating is linked to lowering the academic goal for that child. Teacher 4 had the same outlook at Principal B that there still needs to be an academic expectation, because "after all it's still school, and we can't fix everyone's problems outside of school."

*Question 5 Responses:* What has your experience been with homeless students in the educational system?

Teacher 1 explained that she has had lots of homeless youth come into her classroom, and she tries her best to be accommodating and adjusting schoolwork. She explained that sometimes they act like any other kid and you don't notice, and sometimes they act out. It depends on the student, I try to be patient and try different things to see what works best.

Teacher 2 explained that she had a homeless/foster student in her classroom this year. She eventually figured out what his triggers were and tried her best to adjust herself and the other students to help this student feel safe in the environment. Teacher 3 has one student in the in-transition program, and claims the student is always eager to learn.

Teacher 4's experience with homeless youth was she had at least three in her classroom last year that were classified as in-transition. This is when she first learned about the different ways someone could be classified as homeless. She claimed the only difference she noticed was that sometimes they seemed hungry, and their hygiene and clothing smell were sometimes a problem. Principal B claimed as stated earlier that there are lots of homeless youth in the school due to the local demographics. He did not have much to say about this question.

*Question 6 Responses:* How did your education prepare you to work with students from different backgrounds such as homeless students?

Teacher 1 claimed that her education did not prepare her at all for these kinds of situations. She said she wished she had more education, because she had to simply learn by experience. She claimed having the knowledge beforehand would have been very beneficial for classroom management and to just be prepared overall. She claims that they still ask the district for more resources to learn more about trauma-informed practice, but the district will not help.

Teacher 2 claimed she also did not have any education on how to deal with homelessness or trauma in the classroom. She gained her knowledge through the 30 years of teaching, but still feels like she needs education about working with homeless. She also learned about trauma-informed care through Principal A's staff meetings.

Teacher 3 (1<sup>st</sup> year teacher) claimed that neither her B.A nor Master's truly prepared her to handle situations of trauma or homelessness. She claimed with so many of the students experiencing traumatic events, it affects their learning and development. It's unfortunate that a teacher who just graduated and started teaching feels so unprepared for teaching. If teachers had been taught before the classroom time, then they would feel more equipped for their job.

Teacher 4 claims she can't remember getting any education on homeless youth or trauma-informed care. She remembers only taking classes about behavior and how to manage behavior in the classroom. Principal B does not remember taking any classes that relate to homeless or trauma, but does recommend his first year teachers to read a book about different scenarios in the classroom. It's unfortunate that as a principal instead of finding other resources to train his staff, he simply hands them a book about it.



Principal A found it disheartening that he didn't hear about the trauma-informed care until after he was already an educator. He explained that he didn't believe that neither he nor his staff was adequately prepared for these kinds of situations. So twice a year in the staff meeting he goes over trauma-informed practice and prides on the fact that he school is a trauma-informed school. He attempts to give his teachers and students the resources they need to do their jobs efficiently.

He found it more disheartening that after all these years that there is still not a class-preparing teacher for these circumstances. He said it is inevitable as a teacher to experience a homeless student in the classroom or a student who has experienced a trauma. There was something he said that really stood out for me. He said, "When I look to hire teachers...I can teach you how to teach math, and I can teach you how to teach science. However, I can't teach empathy, and I can't teach someone how to care about the students, and be willing to accommodate and adjust to their needs. That's what I need in a teacher, and that's what the students need." This quote really affected me, because I felt an instant connection with it. So many teachers are taught the basic subjects and how to teach it, but where is the education on how to empathetic, and care about the student as a whole not just academically.

## **Results**

Based on the interviews and the research done, the results are that there is not enough teacher education about homelessness in the educational system. With six out of the six interviewees claiming they were not educated about homelessness or kids with trauma, it is clear that there is an issue. All the teachers and the principals had experienced or are currently experiencing homelessness or traumatized kids in their classrooms or schools.

The research explains that there is one out of every 50 students that is homeless. With homelessness numbers rising, there is a demand for more education for teachers on how to accommodate and help students. Teacher 4 and Principal B had stated that they were not in favor of accommodating for homeless students due to not wanting to lower their academic goal. If they had been educated on how to work with homeless, then they would be knowledgeable about how to accommodate without lowering the academic standards and goals. Teacher 1 and 2 and Principal A have been exposed to Trauma- informed practice and that, along with experience, is why they try to accommodate.

### **Curriculum**

Through the research from articles and the interviews I think the best way for teachers to respond empathetically to create a robust education for homeless youth is through a class for teachers. The class I designed is called Trauma-Informed Education, and it should be taught in the Liberal Studies B.A required courses. The class will essentially help teachers be better prepared for homeless youth in the classroom. The class will be broken up into three units. The three units will be what traumatic stress in a child is, what trauma-informed education is, and what teachers can do to help homeless students. This class would work best if it was required to either be taken at the same time as LS380: Teaching for Change, or if LS380 is taken beforehand. The two classes will work together to create more empathetic teachers to deal with homelessness, social justice, and issues of trauma within the educational system because understanding trauma in a child is also changing one's view of the world.

#### *Unit One: What is Homelessness and Traumatic Stress in a child?*

In this portion of the class students (future teachers), will be educated on homeless youth and what the different demographics from the communities are. This will emphasize to the

learners how widespread homelessness is within the state and the local communities. They will learn about what classifies a student as in-transition or homeless. In this part of the class they will learn why they should care and how it will affect them in their future as teachers. Research has found that positive social support following or during a traumatic event will help the victim build self-esteem and connections to others. It will be crucial to emphasize this to the class, when they are learning why this topic and class is important.

The class will learn about what trauma is, and how the brain responds to physical and emotional threats. Some of the physical responses they will need to know about are: sweating, increased heart rate, or even trouble breathing. They will also be taught the human stress responses to trauma, which are the fight, flight, or flea. They will learn that kids will sometimes be categorized with attention disorders but in reality they are simply responding to traumatic stress. It's necessary to teach them that they shouldn't label students as hyperactive, shy, spacey, or difficult unless they know and understand the child's background.

It will be essential for the class to go over possible triggers for emotional distress, such as sights, sounds, smells, feelings, or experiences that relate to their traumatic experience. Some behaviors that teachers should look for that relate to traumatic stress are: yelling, tantrums, swearing, throwing things, hyperactivity, withdrawing, not responding to others, running away, regression, confused, disconnected, or even going to sleep are all signs that a child is experiencing traumatic stress. They will need to know the developmental stages of each age and how that affects their responses to trauma.

They will hopefully, by the end of this unit, understand what trauma is and how it relates to homeless youth and to them. This part of the unit will end by slowly introducing trauma-informed education.

*Unit Two: What is Trauma-Informed Education?*

In this part of the curriculum they will be exposed to what trauma-informed education is and how it can benefit homeless students. They will learn how trauma affects educational performance. They will learn that being educated on how traumatic stress works and its impact is essential to providing trauma-informed care. This part of the lesson will explain to them that trauma-informed education is designed to adjust services to meet the special needs of trauma survivors (in this context it means homeless students), without impeding on the academic goals.

They will learn how to create a classroom that makes children feel emotionally and physically safe. They can do this by identifying safe spaces such as a reading corner, a counselor's office, a chair in the office, or even a calming room where they can nap, draw, listen to music, or just be in quiet place. This will assist students who are homeless not only as a trauma safe space, but also for homeless students to have a safe space to do their schoolwork.

Additional trauma-informed practice is to remain calm and patient when working with kids. It will be essential to teach the future teachers how to breathe to calm down the body, so they can calm themselves and help the students do the same. It's also essential to teach positive attitudes toward themselves and towards others to work towards positive relationships. Teaching them how to be active listeners and how to implement that in the classroom, as future teachers will be important.

Another way that trauma-informed education is implemented is for future teachers to learn that not every student will be able to complete homework assignments. This is where they need to learn how to adjust and accommodate for homeless and traumatizes youth. It will be important to emphasize that it does not mean lowering academic standards or goals. It simply means figuring out a different way to help students get to academic success.

*Unit Three: What can you do?*

This part of the unit will be geared around creating and teaching empathy in future teachers. It will be centered on how understanding one's own self-identity and perceptions will affect their future as an educator. Understanding their own cultural and personal beliefs will be essential in being able to help others.

Children who live in shelters need a clear understanding of what the family should expect when they come into a classroom. Future teachers need to comprehend how to do achieve that. Understanding what they can do as individuals to help students will be essential in building a community. Another way of creating a sense of community is through possibly making a "welcome to school" bag. There could be supplies such as pencils, pens, notebooks, a small snack, and possibly as note welcoming the students and family to the class, and give some information on what will be done that year. This could create a warm invitation for homeless youth to feel safe in the classroom.

They will also be taught that they could become a liaison for students in-transition, and in this part of the curriculum they will be showed the resources to do so. They will be taught that being in contact with local shelters, meeting at shelters, and possibly volunteering at the shelter could be steps in creating a bridge between the educational community, and the outside community of homeless youth.

They will be taught that they can also help by educating other teachers and staff about the unique needs of homeless youth and how being more sensitive to students needs could boost academic success. They will be taught the resources within each district and how they can use those resources for themselves and to give to the homeless families. Some resources could be:

The National Center for Homeless Education, The National Association for The Education of Homeless Children and Youth, and other service providers.

Another way is to implement literature into the classroom in relation to homelessness. This could allow students to feel more comfortable with their peers being homeless, and it would also benefit homeless youth to feel like they are not alone. Some books are: *The Family Under the Bridge* by Natalie Savage Carlson, *Still a Family: A Story About Homelessness* by Brenda Sturgis, and *Everybody Can Help Somebody* by Ron Hall and Denver Moore.

#### *End Goals For The Curriculum*

Once the units are done, it is hoped that the future educators will be more prepared to teach homeless youth and in turn will give them the opportunity of a more robust education. After the curriculum is done, the future educators should understand why empathy is needed in the classroom. They will also be taught how to accommodate and be empathetic. They will also be knowledgeable in signs of trauma, and have awareness of resources to help not only themselves but also their students.

#### **Problems and Limitations**

There were some limitations with this research paper. The research was done by interview of four teachers and two principals. There was no way to interview every single teacher or principal's experience with homelessness. It would be more beneficial to get more educators experience with homeless and also to have interviewed homeless students to get their perspective.

An issue that I found was that it was difficult to find a large amount of research referring to Trauma-Informed Practice within the educational system. There was also very little literature available discussing the social and educational issues that homeless face. Despite there being

research on homelessness in the educational system, there was none referring to educating teachers about homelessness.

Another issue with this the restrictions on the curriculum created. There is low likelihood of a class being created about only homelessness. And some limitations within the curriculum is that every district has different resources, and that could affect how much each teacher could do.

### **Conclusion**

Through research from literature reviews and interviews I have come to the conclusion that teachers need to respond empathetically and critically to homeless youth in the classroom. This is how teachers can create a more robust education for homeless youth. Homeless youth experience trauma, and there are different responses to trauma. With teachers not being educated on how to respond to trauma, students are misdiagnosed as having attention and bipolar disorders. Responses due to trauma can also lead to teachers labeling children as “bad” kids; with more knowledge of trauma, teachers could be more prepared on how to adjust and understand. All of the teachers interviewed claimed to need more education on how to deal with homelessness and understand the resources available both for educators and students. Through a curriculum created for teachers within their Bachelor degree education, it should assist in the preparation for teachers. It is designed to have three units hitting all the key points that are needed for teachers to be mentally prepared to be empathetic.

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