TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS

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TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES WITH STUDENTS WHO ARE HOMELESS

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ABSTRACT

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Children who are homeless are susceptible to educational challenges and academic hardships. They frequently experience academic, behavioral and emotional problems within the classroom. Classroom teachers who instruct these students often are not informed in advance and discover students are homeless by chance. This study examined how teachers discover their student is homeless; what supports the school provides for the teachers; and what supports, services, or training the teacher believe would have been beneficial to themselves or other teachers. Eight teachers were interviewed in this qualitative research study. Results of the present study may help to inform future educational services for students who are homeless.
I dedicate this thesis to my father, my mother, my grandmother and Derrick. Without all your love and support, I would not have achieved as much as I have. Thank you.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Homelessness affects many people throughout the world. In the United States 23% of the homeless population (Coker et al., 2009), or 1.68 million runaway and homeless youth, are under the age of 18 (The National Network for Youth, 2014). School-aged children in homeless families and independent homeless youth represent the fastest-growing population of homeless individuals in the United States (Ritter & Gottfried, 2002). Runaway and homeless children have become a significant problem for human services providers, policy makers, and communities (Kurtz, Lindsey, Jarvis, & Nackerud, 2000).

Homelessness refers to individuals or families who are without a home, who spend the night in abandoned buildings or on the street those who are temporarily housed or who are housed in homeless shelters and those who are at risk of losing their home are also classified as homeless (Coker et al., 2009). At times, it is unclear whether someone should be classified as homeless or not, as the line between being homeless and being domiciled is a fuzzy boundary (Kusmer, 2002, p. 133).

Many unhoused children and youth have homes they can return to. If they cannot return to the home they left, then usually they can live in the home of a relative or a friend’s family. Many students who are homeless move in and out of settings that may or
may not have an adult caretaker and they usually change their environments frequently. Many of these students cannot return home and often have no family that will take them in. Some have institutional options for housing, but these students may have run away from them or disagreed with the rules of these homes. These students often have many different caseworkers and foster parents. In between moves, they often stay with friends and relatives, in foster care, group homes, juvenile detention, or in a range of supervised and unsupervised shelters (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Homeless students often struggle academically and are more likely to have higher levels of chronic and acute health problems than their non-homeless peers (Groton, Teasley, & Canfield, 2013).

Considering the multiple risks faced by homeless youth, evaluating their situations and developing school-based interventions are priorities for providers and policy makers (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004). However, there is currently a lack of research regarding what interventions may be successful in alleviating risk and supporting school success of students who are homeless (Masten, Fiat, Labella, & Strack, 2015). Studies have fixated on what attributes a teacher can have that would be most valuable when educating students who are homeless, few have focused on the experiences of the teachers that educate these students (Moore, 2013). Educational professionals, including teachers, should be aware of the unique needs of homeless children in order to better serve them in the classroom. Thus, the purpose of this study was to obtain more insight into the experiences, struggles and needs of teachers in addressing the challenges presented by students who are homeless.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

Images and observations of contemporary homelessness abound but they cannot substitute for a thoroughgoing review of the subject (Hopper & Hamberg, 1984, p. 7).

The purpose of this literature review is to examine challenges affecting the school functioning of students who are homeless. It summarizes research examining the life, education and experiences of children and adolescents who are homeless while in school. In order to have positive educational outcomes for homeless students, knowing how to better serve this population is vital. The literature review begins with a discussion of challenges homeless children often face, including educational, emotional and behavioral difficulties. It then segues into how students who are homeless are served in the education system, including teachers’ perceptions of the challenges in educating students who are homeless.

Homeless Youth

Approximately 23 percent of the homeless population in the United States is under the age of 18 (Henry, Cortes, & Morris, 2013). The National Coalition for the Homeless (2011) states that roughly 1.35 million children experience homelessness each year. In addition, up to 40% of the youth who become homeless without their families (e.g., runaway or “kicked out”) will not return to their homes (Keeshin, & Campbell,
Children who frequently move between homes or who experience homelessness have disruptions in daily routines, lesson plans and assessments in schools, social supports, relationships, and community resources (Cutuli et al., 2013). The increase in the homeless population over the last 20-25 years is largely due to an increasing shortage of reasonably priced rental housing and a concurrent increase in poverty (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009).

Most children have parents or other adults to care for them and assist in meeting their needs throughout their life. One of these important needs is a place to live. The majority of children in the United States live in some type of home that is a permanent fixture in their lives; however, some children are not so fortunate. Often, despite parents’ best efforts, it may be impossible for them to provide a home for their family. Early childhood experiences can make a substantial difference in outcomes for homeless children.

**Needs of Homeless Youth**

Abraham Maslow wanted to understand what motivated people and what their basic needs in life were in order to live a happy and fulfilled life (McLeod, 2007). In 1943, he created a hierarchy of needs that states that when one need is fulfilled the person moves on to the next need. These hierarchical needs include: biological and physical (food, water, air, shelter and warmth), safety (protection from elements, security, law, etc.), love and belongingness (friendship, intimacy, affection, etc.), esteem (achievement, mastery, respect for others) and finally, self-actualization (realizing personal potential,
self-fulfillment, etc.; McLeod, 2007). A visual representation of this hierarchy is represented below:

![Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs](image)

*Figure 1. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943)*

Most homeless individuals cannot move beyond Maslow’s first need in the hierarchy—biological and physical. Without this need met, it is difficult to move on to the other needs required for a happy, motivating life.

Vissing (2000) described the myriad needs of homeless youth, dividing them into the following major four categories: a) physical care b) space, c) stability/security, and d) autonomy and self-control.
Physical care. Homeless students often do not get enough to eat and usually come to school hungry. Students who are homeless also have higher rates of upper respiratory and ear infections, common cold symptoms and skin diseases (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004). Homeless children have a hard time wearing clean clothes each day and that their day-to-day schedule constantly changes and can be very stressful (Vising, 2000). They may not get dental screenings or regular check-ups at the doctor. This can lead to poor energy levels and a diminished interest in activities in which healthy children partake. These children also have difficulties concentrating and focusing in the classroom (Vising, 2000). All of these factors can influence homeless students’ performance in school.

Space. Children and youth who are homeless usually do not have a space to call their own. They are unable to store their toys place, which often means they are unable to have any toys. The need for space includes both a safe space and a personal space, both of which are lacking for homeless youth.

Safe space. Youth who are homeless lack a safe space to play and develop gross motor skills (e.g., running, jumping, climbing). Children who live in shelters are usually constrained because the space they are in is usually very small and limited (Vising, 2000). If a child lives in an abandoned building, a place with many other people in tents (tent city) or another public place, they lack the opportunities to explore their environment because doing so can be unsafe. Children also need access to materials that help develop their fine motor skills, such as having a pencil to practice writing or drawing. When they lack access to these items, children can fall behind in their physical
development (Vissing, 2000). Finally, homeless children may not get enough sleep at night or they may be too afraid to sleep if they are not in a safe place (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004).

**Personal space.** Children need access to personal space in addition to a safe space. A personal (private) space where a child can be alone helps develop emotional and intrapersonal skills. Personal spaces can also be retreats for children to get away from too much stimulation and to give them some control over what they do in their free time (Eddowes & Butcher, 2000). Children with physical homes typically have a small space where they can save their personal items and take a break from others in the home (Vissing, 2000). Children who are homeless may live in small spaces or crowded shelters. They usually have few items of their own with no place to keep them (Vissing, 2000).

**Stability and security.** Children need consistency and predictability in their environment in order to maintain a sense of well-being. Stability in a child’s environment gives a secure base to allow him/her to try new things and develop flexibility in life. Children develop trust when they have a stable environment and when they are able to interact with the same adults consistently. This consistent interaction helps children know what will happen each day as well as those they can turn to for help; this way they know there will be predictability in their lives (Vissing, 2000).

Children who are homeless lack stability and permanence of a home. If children live in a shelter, it is usually temporary. When children move around constantly, it is difficult for them to have a secure and predictable life. In turn, without this secure and predictable life, it can be difficult to be confident and to trust new people. Until children
view a home or school as positive, secure and predictable, they may not be confident enough to be successful (Vissing, 2000).

**Autonomy and self-control.** Youth who are homeless often struggle to develop a sense of independence. Erikson established that a determination for autonomy usually begins at age two and lays the foundation for decision-making abilities and self-control (McLeod, 2008). When children have choices, learn to fix conflicts, and develop self-help skills, they can move toward being independent (Grossman, 2014).

**Challenges for Homeless Youth**

Homeless youth face many challenges and issues every day. School staff, including teachers, need to be aware of these challenges in order to facilitate a positive educational experience for homeless youth. These include issues with parents and families, housing, health, social-emotional, and educational issues.

**Parent and family issues.** There are roughly 1 to 1.4 million homeless women in the United States, 50 to 60% of whom care for children under the age of 18 (David, Gelberg, & Suchman, 2012). Mothers with young children represent the fastest growing subset of the homeless population (David, Gelberg, & Suchman, 2012). According to David et al. (2012), “the most common profile of a homeless family is one headed by a single woman in her late 20s with approximately two children, one or both who are under six years of age” (p. 1). Furthermore, over 92% of mothers who are homeless have experienced sexual abuse and/or severe physical abuse during their lifetime (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2011).
Histories of abuse are common among homeless youth and a majority of those who report abuse are still affected by it years later (Keeshin & Campbell, 2011). Keeshin and Campbell (2011) interviewed 43 homeless males and 23 homeless females between the ages of 18 and 23. They found that 42% reported experiencing physical and sexual abuse before the age of 18, and 72% reported that they were still affected by the abuse that took place. A study conducted by Molner et al. (1998) found that homeless youth who were sexually or physically abused before leaving home were 1.9 to 4.3 times more likely to attempt suicide than other street youth who were not sexually or physically abused. There are no recent studies indicating the number of homeless youth who have experienced physical and sexual abuse.

When compared to low-income housed mothers, mothers who are homeless have twice the rate of drug and alcohol dependence (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration, 2011). Nyamathi, Kennan, and Bayley (1998) found that women who used drugs had fewer people they could rely on when they needed help or personal resources, as well as a higher occurrence of depression, hostility and anxiety in comparison to past drug users and women who never used drugs. They also discovered that support networks of current drug users often encourage a continuation of substance abuse and that women have to renegotiate a new support system if they decided to stop using substances. Significant adjustments would occur in a homeless woman’s social life if she decided to stop using substances.

**Housing.** When a family is without a steady income it can often lead to foreclosures because there is no way to pay the mortgage. In September 2014, the official
unemployment rate was 5.9% (Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2014). Foreclosures have contributed to the large number of families who currently experience homelessness. The National Coalition for the Homeless released a report discussing the relationship between homelessness and foreclosure. The report found a 32% increase in the number of foreclosures between April 2008 and April 2009. In 2009, at the start of the recession, six million jobs were lost (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2009). Since then, many jobs were recovered, but times are still difficult for many families.

A study conducted by David, Gelberg and Suchman (2012) found that homeless mothers and their children usually experience a long period of unstable housing with frequent moves, short stays in someone’s home (friends of the family, family members, etc.), stays with friends and relatives and extended time spent in shelters. With children of homeless mothers moving around constantly, it can be difficult for school staff to serve these students appropriately, including providing academic or behavioral interventions. If a student moves or transfers to another school, a school psychologist can help by sending records to the new school and ensure the student is enrolled right away so less instruction and intervention time is lost. In addition, schools should develop a feasible outline or plan to serve homeless students that encourages collaboration of all involved parties.

**Health.** Schools should be aware of homeless children’s increased likelihood of health concerns due to their precarious living situations. The Homelessness Impact Model presented by Murphy and Tobin (2011) indicates that homelessness often leads to: unhealthy living conditions, malnutrition, inadequate medical care, social isolation,
proximity to victimization either with one parent being victimized or the child being victimized, and a lack of parental support. All of these risk factors harm the child’s well-being, leading to physical health impairments, emotional impairments, social and educational consequences (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Homeless school-aged children are more likely than housed children to experience hunger, stress, hyperactivity, developmental delays and problems sleeping. They are also more prone to health problems and domestic, sexual and physical violence. In addition, homeless students may show difficulties concentrating, cognitive and psychological problems, and learning disabilities (Hall, 2007).

Coker et al. (2009) examined the effects of homelessness on fifth grade students via interviews with 5,024 parents and 5,147 students in 118 schools. Parents were asked to report about their homelessness, their child’s health and what they do to keep their child healthy on a qualitative survey and to complete the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI-18) as a measure of parental feelings and emotions (Derogatis, 2001). The children completed the Pediatric Health-Related Quality of Life Inventory 4.0, which measures a child’s quality of life from 2 to 18 years old (Varni, Seid & Rode, 1999). Of the parents interviewed, 7% experienced homelessness; and this 7% were closely examined in the study. Forty percent of these families spent at least six months homeless and 28% reported staying with friends or family. Coker et al. (2009) found that homeless children typically reported diminished quality of life due to health disparities, and are often uninsured or insured by Medicaid and use a health center or clinic as their source of preventative care or have no consistent source of health care (Coker et al., 2009). Further,
these children were more likely to have had a serious injury in the past year such as head trauma and broken bones. Homeless children experienced more emotional, behavioral, and developmental problems than their non-homeless peers. They were also more likely to receive care for a behavioral, emotional or substance abuse problems, as well as for witnessing serious violence with a gun or knife within the past year. The study found a positive link between parental psychological distress and homelessness.

Masten, Fiat, Labella and Strack (2015) conducted a survey of parents and their children who were housed in emergency shelter in 1993 and compared the data to the survey results from questionnaires that were completed by parents and their children who were living in shelters in 2015. The children from the questionnaire administered in 2015, reported they had fewer friends and spent less time with friends when compared to children not living in shelters. These children also felt they were more likely to live in a shelter when they were an adult. Children from the sample in 1993 and the sample in 2015, had a higher risk of having recent traumatic life events and parent distress that predicted more internalizing and externalizing problems. The authors of this study suggested that homelessness was a marker of high cumulative risk for all sorts of difficulties.

**Social-emotional issues.** The average school-aged child who is homeless experiences many different emotional difficulties. Irrational fears and phobias, anxiety, low self-esteem, embarrassment, anger, aggression, depression and suicide attempts are all common emotional difficulties of this population. Homeless children typically exhibit immature interactions with peers and adults, and sometimes withdraw from others. In the
classroom, frequent disruptive behaviors are also common (Hall, 2007). The American Psychological Association (2015) states that half of school-aged homeless children have anxiety and depression; one in every five preschoolers who are homeless has emotional problems that require professional care (American Psychological Association, 2015). The American Psychological Association (2015) also notes that unaccompanied youth are more likely to have mental health problems such as anxiety, depression and PTSD as well as substance abuse problems.

**Educational issues.** Residential mobility is linked with lower levels of academic achievement, more problems at school, and increased rates of grade retention (Cutuli et al., 2013). “About 1.9 million low-income students between the ages of 9 and 11 move each year, whereas 794,617 homeless students attended public school during the 2007-2008 school year” (Cutuli et al., 2013, p. 1). Homeless students tend to experience high levels of family hardship and poor developmental outcomes. When represented as a group, children who experience poverty underachieve academically when compared to students from higher SES families. A study conducted with 1st through 12th graders found that children who moved three or more times were 60% more likely to repeat a grade— even when controlling for poverty and other socio-demographic risks. These children were also more likely to be expelled or suspended from school (Cutuli et al., 2013).

A study by Fantuzzo and Perlman (2007) found that homelessness predicted lower levels of literacy and science achievement among 11,835 students from a second grade cohort in a large, urban school district. This finding was maintained even when gender, ethnicity, child maltreatment, birth-related risk, and out-of-home placement were
controlled for. Rafferty, Shinn, and Weitzman (2004) found lower levels of reading and math achievement for homeless students in the year following a stay in a shelter compared to low-income, housed school-aged children. This difference, however, disappeared five years later.

Mizerek and Hinz (2004) found that teachers often reported that the homeless students in their classroom lacked important basic skills such as: listening, following directions, participating in classroom activities and asking for help. Up to half of students who were homeless in their sample had developmental delays as well as a learning disability and they were less likely to be promoted to the next grade or turn in homework. Most of the research suggests that homelessness represents a risk for achievement in school (Cutuli et al., 2013). Rafferty, Shinn, and Weitzman (2004) found that students who were staying in a shelter had lower levels of math and reading compared to low-income and housed school-age children.

**School attendance.** Cutuli et al. (2013) found that homeless students had poorer school attendance than their peers who were not homeless. District-wide attendance rates were 94.4%, and attendance for the homeless and highly mobile group was 90.6% (Cutuli et al., 2013). One study found that up to 12% of homeless children are not enrolled in school and up to 45% did not attend school on a regular basis (Duffield, 2001). When school attendance rates are lower than 93% it can cause problems for children (Cutuli et al., 2013), such as missing important in-class lessons and assignments. Many homeless students do not attend school on a regular basis because of multiple moves between
temporary homes, which can result in them having to choose between transferring schools and commuting for hours (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004).

There is currently a lack of research examining the effects of attendance on homelessness. Henley et al. (2010) hypothesized that when children attend school regularly it can help maintain their engagement and sustain their residence in the community. The results supported the hypothesis that youth who dropped out of school were nearly eight times more likely to end up on the streets permanently than those who went to school daily.

Another issue that affects attendance is transportation to school. Usually, schools cannot afford a special bus stop at a local shelter. Therefore, students must find another way of arriving to class every day (Love, 2009). If the student’s mother is in a battered woman’s shelter, she may not be able to take her child to school because of safety reasons. One way to overcome this barrier is to work with parents in order to find a feasible way of getting their child to school on time every day. Daily school attendance is vital in helping to keep students off the street.

**School policy.** Most homeless students are identified by school personnel, such as the teacher, counselor or administrator when the student either tells someone in the staff, they hear it from a friend of the student, or the parent tells them (Hall, 2007). However, the homeless status of students may not have been brought to the attention of school staff. When most school policies and procedures were written, homelessness was likely not given consideration (Hall, 2007). As a result, the school system can present obstacles for this population.
School enrollment processes present one challenge. Many students who are homeless do not maintain academic and/or attendance records from their previous school(s). Another possible obstacle is authenticating residency and citizenship. In some instances, merely confirming the legal guardian of a child is a barrier. Transportation, as mentioned earlier, is a common barrier for homeless students. Enrollment and transportation issues can, in turn, lead to high dropout and truancy rates for homeless students (Hall, 2007).

**McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was the first, and continues to be the only, federal legislative response to homelessness among public school children. This act defines homelessness, ensures that homeless students are immediately enrolled in a new school and that they have educational stability while in school (Washington State Requirements and Guidance for Homeless Education, 2004). It also requires schools to have a liaison who works with students who are homeless and their families. This liaison also serves as a resource for educators (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004).

**School-based Services for Students Who Are Homeless**

Schools can do a number of things to help homeless students. One is to include them in the classroom so they do not feel left out and are not identified as being different from the other students. Schools can also provide mental health services.

**Homeless youth inclusion.** Vising (2000) suggests that school admission be prompt as required by the McKinney-Vento act. If there is a delay, there is a high chance that the student will drop out. Parents should complete forms and be reminded that they
will remain confidential. It is vital that forms are kept confidential because many homeless women with children and children are victims of domestic violence.

Students should be given a locker to store their things in and be permitted to use the locker room to shower when necessary. Administrators, teachers, and school personnel should make sure students are signed up for free or reduced lunch and breakfast since they may not have consistent access to meals (Vising, 2000). Finally, school psychologists, counselors and social workers should give students and parents a list of resources and agencies that are available to assist them in the community.

Administrators can assist homeless students by placing them in a classroom that will meet their needs and capitalize on the teacher’s strengths. Teachers should be informed of the possible issues that homeless students face and be willing to provide extra help to these students when necessary. Teachers should avoid assigning TV, computer or other technological assignments to these students. Teachers should also collect attendance data and follow-up with the student when he or she is not present, and make accommodations for late arrivals (Vising, 2000). Finally, it is suggested that teachers maintain a flexible grading system—allowing additional time to turn in assignments. It is helpful if students are permitted to complete these assignments in class as well and not at home, as they may not have adequate study space or assistance at home (Vissing, 2000).

Mental health services. Chow, Mistry, and Melchor (2015) stated a prominent theme teachers had noticed among students who were homeless was that these students’ home instability affected their behavioral, emotional and social adjustment in the
classroom. Mizerek & Hinz (2004) stated that homeless students lack social skills, have lower self-esteem, and experience depression and anxiety. They may also be withdrawn, shy, feel isolated or disconnected from their school and classmates (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004). Homeless youth are typically provided mental health services through housing services or independent sources such as a counselor, charity or a low-income clinic/hospital. In order to obtain basic necessities (food, water, etc.) they are usually offered case management, counseling, physical health services and substance abuse/mental health services. Homeless youth often need sex education, family recombination services and protection from being exploited and abused on the streets. Conversely, because the homeless youth population is so diverse, no one intervention is suited for everyone (McCaskill et al., 1998; Murphy & Tobin, 2011).

**Teachers’ Experiences with Homeless Students**

In most cases, individuals who work most closely with homeless students are teachers in the classrooms. Mizerek and Hinz (2004) suggest that sometimes students are directly referred to the school as homeless students so the teacher knows upon the student’s arrival that they are homeless. However, often educators learn on their own if a student is homeless and then offer assistance once they find out. Some students will directly tell their teachers that they are homeless, whereas some may make vague references to where they are living. Teachers may find out that students are homeless through changes in their appearance or their daily habits. For instance, students who are homeless may wear the same clothes repeatedly, appear lethargic or tired, demonstrate a
decline in the quality of schoolwork, and most often, they may have multiple absences from school (Mizerek & Hinz, 2004).

The relationship that develops between homeless students and school staff is incredibly important because it may be the only positive interactions they have with adults on a regular basis. School provides stability for homeless students and gives them a sense of self-worth. Thus, it is imperative that teachers know how to work with homeless students and that they are provided with support and suggestions for how to best serve this population.

**Suggestions for teachers.** In order to give a sense of stability to a student who is homeless, teachers should refrain from frequently rearranging the furniture in the classroom. It is also helpful if the classroom resembles a home by having plants, a class pet, photographs of the students, and furniture such as a couch. Teachers are also advised to give a student who is homeless classroom tasks and responsibilities. This can offer the student a sense of control and independence that may be vital to their development. Teachers should also establish a daily routine that the student can depend on (Hall, 2007).

Hall (2007) recommends that teachers have a portfolio that documents the student’s progress, abilities and work over short periods of time. A portfolio can quickly and easily transfer with the student. Hall (2007) further suggests creating a contract with the student about homework assignments, allowing the student to finish assignments on their own or to complete them at their own pace (Hall, 2007).
The Present Research Study

Previous studies have focused on teacher characteristics that are most valuable when working with at-risk and highly mobile youth, but very few have focused on the experiences of teachers who serve students who are homeless (Moore, 2013). Research is lacking regarding what support teachers feel they need in order to best serve the homeless youth population. The present study investigated the experiences, struggles, and needs of teachers in addressing the challenges presented by students who are homeless. It was an exploratory project that examined the supports that teachers of homeless students currently receive and the supports they feel could assist them in teaching homeless children in the future.
CHAPTER III

METHOD

Research Question

The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the experiences of teachers who currently or previously have served students who are homeless. Additionally, teachers’ perspectives of what could help them be more effective when working with homeless students were explored. Thus, this study explored the following research question: *What are the experiences of teachers who work with homeless students?*

Researcher’s Role

The researcher in this study was a substitute high school teacher for the high school involved in this study and she was an intern school psychologist at the middle school involved in this study. When she was an intern school psychologist she worked under and closely with the school psychologist who was classified as an administrator. This may have impacted some of the middle school participants pertaining to what they chose to disclose about the administrative support they had received when working with students who are homeless.

Participants and Setting

The eight participants in this study included a purposive, convenience sample of teachers from two school districts in the Midwestern region of the United States. One
participating school district was an urban school district and the other was a rural school district. The participating urban high school had approximately 1,500 students enrolled; the participating rural middle school had approximately 800 students enrolled.

To be eligible for participation in the study, all of the participants had to have taught or currently be teaching a student who is homeless as defined as individuals without a home, who spend the night in abandoned buildings or on the street. Those who were temporarily housed or who were housed in homeless shelters and those who were at risk of losing their home were also classified as homeless (Coker et al., 2009). This study did not include students who are defined as highly mobile. Because the data collected was qualitative, a large sample was not needed to enhance generalizability of the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Instead, readers of this study should consider the participants and the setting and make judgments about the transferability of the outcomes based on similarities and differences of the teachers’ experiences.

The data collection took place within the school that the teacher worked at. This was either in an office in the school or in the teacher’s classroom.

The first teacher, Wendy, was a high school special education teacher. Wendy has been teaching for 13 years in various districts and within various subjects.

Paige has spent most of her life teaching. Paige has a tremendous amount of experience with all types of students and was able to provide much useful information. She has been teaching for 26 years, mainly in special education with students who fall under the disability category of emotional disturbance.
Camy was another high school teacher. She was able to provide some insight into the world of English as a Second Language students. Many of these students come to the United States with a sibling or with one parent and are highly transient—moving to where new work is located. Camy taught in Elementary before teaching High School. She has been teaching for 12 years.

The last high school teacher who participated in this study was Leon. Leon was previously in the police force before he taught and offered a very different outlook on students who are homeless. This was mainly because he used to encounter these students and their families outside of school before he became a teacher. Leon has taught special education for 6 years.

Kristy, the first middle school teacher to be interviewed has two years of experience. She has taught special education for one of those years and the other year she was a long-term substitute teacher and became very close with one student who was homeless.

Cory is a 7th grade general education science teacher. He has taught 17 years and offered a lot of insight on how male teachers become familiar with students who are homeless. He pointed out that many male teachers are not the ones who are approached and initially told that a student is homeless.

Kyle, also a 7th grade teacher, is currently teaching math in the general education setting. He has taught for 16 years and provided a lot of insightful information about students who are homeless.
The last participant in this research study was Brian, a 6th, 7th and 8th grade teacher. Brian teaches math and has taught and currently teaches for an online school. Online schools are significantly different than regular public schools, and Brian was able to state that he had a closer relationship with the students he encountered online than the students within the general education classroom.

Research Design

The current study employed a phenomenological qualitative design, described by Bogdan and Biklen (2003) as a study that seeks an individual’s perceptions and meanings of an experience. This design was chosen because the researcher sought to obtain data that allows for recommendations to be made regarding how schools support teachers who serve homeless children in their classrooms. The use of qualitative methods allowed the study to be inductive, rather than deductive, meaning that it did not impose hypotheses on the data, but rather allowed the data to make its own meaning (Mertens, 2010). A phenomenological design allowed the researcher to cast a wide net for information gathering in order to guide the development of theories. With phenomenological analysis, information is gathered through the participants’ personal experiences to guide the emergence of common themes that exist amongst participants (Smith, 2004).

Procedures

The study was submitted for approval by the University of Dayton’s Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A for consent letters).

Recruitment and consent. The researcher sent an email request to the principal of a mid-sized school district in the Midwest to obtain permission to conduct the research
via one-on-one interviews with teachers who are eligible for and agree to participation. Upon receiving permission, the researcher sent an e-mail request to the teachers in the district to seek referrals for teachers who are known to have or who may have previously taught a homeless child in their classroom. The researcher did not receive any referral requests and therefore had to approach teachers at random to ask if they would be willing to participate in an interview. Participation was entirely voluntary. All interested individuals were given a consent form before beginning the interview, which included a description of the study. Additionally, the consent form notified participants that they would be compensated for participation with a $5 gift card to a local business. Consent was obtained prior to data collection.

**Data collection.** Teachers participated in a semi-structured interview (average length = 45 minutes) with the researcher (see Appendix C). The interview sessions were audio-recorded and there was a back-up audio-recording device. The researcher also took minimal notes. Demographic information was collected from participants after the interview (see Appendix B), and included: 1) current teaching assignment, 2) years of teaching experience, 3) subjects and grade levels taught, 4) amount of time they knew the homeless student and 5) the length of time since they taught the student. Interviews were scheduled either via email or in person and occurred at a time and location that was convenient to the participant. The interviews were completed in the spring of the 2014-2015 school year and in the fall of the 2015-2016 school year after teachers had a few weeks to get to know new students. To ensure participants’ confidentiality, each individual was given a pseudonym. Table 1 reflects participants’ demographic
information. The median years of teaching experience for participants was 12, with the least experienced teacher having 2 years and the most experienced having 26. The middle and high school teacher participants taught special education, general education and English as a second language. All teachers were given a pseudonym to protect confidentiality.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Grade(s) taught</th>
<th>Assignment</th>
<th>Years of experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wendy</td>
<td>9, 10, 11, 12</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paige</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Camy</td>
<td>9, 10, 11, 12</td>
<td>ESL</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon</td>
<td>9, 10, 11, 12</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristy</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cory</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyle</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>6, 7, 8</td>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Instrument.** Teachers were interviewed using semi-structured interviews (see Appendix C). Mertens (2010) notes that in qualitative research designs, the researcher is the instrument for collecting data. Thus, the researcher decides which questions to ask.
and in what order, what to observe, and what to record. He or she also ultimately decides how to interpret the data collected, which makes it particularly important to be actively engaged with participant during the interview (Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Interview questions may be about behaviors, opinions or values, feelings, knowledge, or background information. In the present study, questions were predominantly knowledge and opinion-based. A fixed-question—open-response design was employed to ensure a balance of scientific rigor and flexible exploration (Weiss, 1994). Open-ended questions allowed participants to share the experiences and perceptions that were unique to them. This also encouraged teachers’ responses to be broad or specific, and as detailed as participants could make them. All participants were asked similar questions so responses could be coded, themes identified, and discrepancies discussed (Natasi & Schensul, 2005).

The interview protocol included questions regarding notification of the student’s homeless status, supports and services that were available to teachers while they were teaching the child, and future supports and services they believed would be beneficial for working with homeless children. The interview protocol was pilot tested with two teachers who had experience teaching students who have been homeless prior to gathering actual data to address any unforeseen problems with the interview protocol and/or process. No changes were made by the researcher following the pilot study.

**Data analysis.** Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher using a multimedia player. Both the interviewer and participant’s words were included in the transcriptions. Transcribed interviews were re-read while listening to the taped
interview to ensure accuracy. Interviews were then coded according to Saldana (2013), utilizing notes taken during the interview as well as notes taken when re-reading transcriptions. Pre-coded data were organized into themes to allow the researcher to identify common responses to questions and generate true codes. Once multiple codes were developed, they were analyzed and recoded into broader, more general content descriptors. The purpose of this coding method was to organize the information that emerged from the interviews into coherent and applicable themes by which to better understand the experiences of the participants. The data were qualitative in nature, and was analyzed qualitatively for any repeated patterns or thematic content. A colleague familiar with qualitative design reviewed the data along with the transcripts to ensure that the analysis was logical, unbiased and that theoretical saturation was reached. No revisions were made.

The criteria typically used to judge the quality of quantitative data are internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. However, these criteria are not commonly utilized with qualitative data. A number of writers have explained this, but perhaps no others have done so better than Lincoln and Guba (1985). They explain that the more appropriate criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is equated with internal validity, transferability with external validity, dependability with reliability, and confirmability with objectivity. Credibility includes prolonged engagement with data, member checks and peer debriefing, and monitoring developing constructions. Transferability requires the researcher to provide extensive description of the time, place, context, and culture of the research situation.
Dependability involves the researcher detailing each step of the process and noting when changes occur. Confirm-ability has to do with the data being logically induced and independent of the researcher’s imagination (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These aforementioned techniques are necessary to obtain credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable data and were employed throughout the interviewing and data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This research project examined teachers’ experiences with children who are homeless. Specifically, it sought to discover how teachers are typically informed that a student is homeless, the support provided to teachers when a homeless student is in their class, and what supports or services teachers believe would be beneficial in increasing their effectiveness with students who are homeless. The terms “support” and “services” were defined broadly in order to allow teachers to share their genuine opinions and ideas concerning their experiences with children who are homeless. As the transcribed interviews were reviewed, certain realities and perceptions became evident. Theoretical saturation, as defined by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), occurs at the point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change in the codebook. Theoretical saturation was not reached in this research study.

Learning of Student’s Homelessness

Upon reviewing the transcribed interview protocols for responses, regarding how teachers are informed of a student’s homelessness; it was apparent that there was not a single method teachers became aware of this information. Three general themes emerged, however, and included: 1) teachers found out by the student self-disclosing or the teacher
asking questions and discovering it on their own, 2) teachers saw the student change somehow (were hungrier, were more unclean), and 3) teachers were informed by school personnel or a parent.

**Informed by self-disclosure and questions.** One theme that emerged which reiterated the experiences of teachers in Mizerek and Hinz’s (2004) study, who shared that some students will tell their teachers that they are homeless or the teachers will just stumble upon the information. Five of the eight participating teachers interviewed reported that they were notified that a student was homeless by asking questions or having the student self-disclose.

Wendy, a high school special education teacher shared the following:

Sometimes they tell you, and that’s usually the best way. Um, most of the time you kind of stumble on it. Like you might be talking about homework. ‘Well I left my homework, and I can’t go back and get it.’ ‘Well where did you leave it?’ ‘I left it at my auntie’s house. Well I was there yesterday, but I don’t know if I’m going to go back there today.’ ‘Well when are you going back home?’ ‘Uh…I don’t know’ You know kinda that, or you start piecing it together. You’re like ‘Okay so where are you staying?’ You know so kinda sometimes happens like that.

Leon, a high school special education teacher, shared that several students confided in him.

Well I think you know as a teacher a lot of times you know your students confide information in you…um…they feel comfortable around you, they feel secure, um, so…three or four confided in me. Um, the fourth student um didn’t actually confide in me directly um…some of the information he had given me about um, what he was doing late at night and uh, family situation, um, kind of led me to believe that he was.

Kyle, a seventh grade general education teacher shared that students say they’re homeless in an indirect way.
I don’t think they’ve come out and said, ‘Hey, I’m homeless,’ but they roundabout say you know, ‘I’m not living with my parents,’ or, ‘My parents are not around,’ ‘I’m staying with a friend,’ but to actually come out and use the word homeless, no. I do actually have now one middle school student that is not really shy about talking about their living situation and you know he’s pretty open about it, so he doesn’t seem to be too shy about it or discouraged about it. But I think maybe he’s a pretty mature kid so I think maybe he understands part of the reason why they’re there maybe. I really haven’t sat down and talked to him too much about it since we’re kind of starting the school year, but some students kind of are sheltered, kind of keep that within themselves, but he’s pretty open about it, which is surprising.

Kristy, a sixth grade teacher of students with multiple disabilities talked about listening to the details students say.

Sometimes kids say things and they don’t realize—like younger kids, they don’t realize that they’re disclosing certain things. When they talk about, when you ask you know, “What did you have for supper?” “How was your night?” You know, just listen for detail, because sometimes um you know they may not have much to say about what they ate because they don’t have a lot to eat. Or they might talk about how they can only have so much to rationalize the foods, so you just pick up on things.

Teachers saw the students change. Another theme reported by teachers in this study was that teachers often acquired information regarding a child’s homeless status by seeing their physical attributes change in some way. This included the students suddenly becoming hungrier than usual, wearing unclean or ill-fitting clothing, becoming unproductive in school, having multiple absences, or not having completed homework.

Camy, a high school English as a second language (ESL) teacher, shared her story of multiple homeless students she has taught.

They’re not as clean. They wear the same clothes like everyday. Um, again like they’re less nourished you know like they were always the kids that like there was extra breakfast—because we would eat in our classrooms, breakfast in our classrooms at the elementary school…um they would always ask for more food or try to take more food and put it in their bags so that they had stuff for later. Um, you know I mean like I said they’re not clean. Um…you know like they didn’t
wash their clothes very often and um wearing the same thing everyday like they smelled bad. But they were---especially when they were younger, they were loving you know like again, they just want to feel a part of somewhere I think. So, I mean, I think that would be really about it. Like they weren’t ever, at the elementary, they weren’t bad, they weren’t behavior problems or anything but they definitely, you could tell that they lacked like the necessities of being taken care of.

Kristy discussed some of the signs that teachers should look for when talking with a student they may believe is homeless.

Um well, sometimes when students are withdrawn, or they might wear clothes that don’t fit anymore, um they might be hungry a lot if they’ll communicate that. Sometimes you can kind of tell that they don’t feel good. May you know, they’re dehydrated or hungry and if they’re not vocalizing that you know what kind of signs would you look for, for that? Um, a lot of times if they scarf down food, you know they may be familiar with being hungry.

Paige, a teacher of high school seniors discussed how she usually learned a student was homeless.

Uh, attendance becomes very erratic. Uh, lack of, a change in, um kids who are consistently good at schoolwork or, you know, become very disengaged. You know, um but they become very preoccupied. If you see a great emotional change in the students. Um, some of them have acted out, you know become loud and obnoxious. Um, maybe skipping class because they’re trying to find where they’re going to stay that night. Um, I had a girl with a baby coming to school with a car seat. Carrying it with her because she wasn’t sure where she was going that night.

**Teachers were informed by school personnel or the parent.** On two occasions, teachers were informed by either previous teachers, a member of the school staff or a parent of the student. Interviewees mentioned that sometimes students were either too embarrassed to confide in them or did not have a close enough relationship with the student to be the one to discover they were homeless.
Cory, a 7th grade teacher, discussed how sometimes students are embarrassed to talk to him about their home life.

Cory: I think they get too embarrassed with me. They just wouldn’t feel comfortable…It’s usually through somebody else, yeah…We do have a liaison, or somebody that helps and usually um, I usually go to that person and say, “Hey you know, I think this child’s homeless,” and they’ll say, “Oh yes, we know” and um, I forget her name, it was a couple of years ago. Um, she just, I could tell that things weren’t right at home. Then I find out that she was homeless and living out of a van. So I tried to reach out to her a little bit but usually a lot of the students, at least with me—of course I’m pretty stern in the classroom, they don’t really like to share a lot with me because they feel like they’re embarrassed. And you know, I even told this child that you know, I’m not here to embarrass you, I’m here to help you. And sometimes that’s still not enough… Usually the kids will tell me themselves. Sometimes I will be notified by the office, but not always.

Camy, discussed how parents would tell the school they were homeless.

A lot of times the parents would tell us. Um, they would come in and you know talk to—most of them didn’t start the school year with you. You know, I mean…like they’d move in so the parents always bring the little kids you know, to the school or whatever, and you’d find out that way. Or they would tell someone at the school and the school people would tell you. Sometimes you just found out from their enrollment form like when you check their cumulative folder. When you get a new student you always go down and check the cum in the elementary just to see like where they came from and if they have record from other schools and stuff, so sometimes you just found out through that. Um, with K this year, I found out when his teacher—because he bounced back between here and XX, um so when he left XX his teacher called me. So they knew, I don’t know how they knew.

Kyle, a 7th grade teacher, discussed how the homeless liaison that worked at his school helped him find out a student was homeless.

Through our liaison here. Um we have a new one this year but XX was here for my entire year of teaching and she kind of informed us of that. And then, when I receive a new student at the other school I work at, I sit down with the administration and they kind of give us a background of the student that’s coming in based on the information that they were given, so, through my peers, I guess.
Wendy noted that sometimes students will tell the teachers they’re homeless and sometimes the school will tell the teachers.

Sometimes they tell you, and that’s usually the best way. But uh, most schools have some type of arc for the homeless kids. That’s never been me. We usually had somebody that will come and say, “Hey, you know, they’re on my list,” You know, so um schools—at least XX public schools, like they did a really good job of tracking kids down and trying to keep up with them.

**Supports and Services from School**

Analysis of the teacher interviews regarding the supports and services they received when faced with challenges in working with homeless students, three themes emerged. These themes included: 1) no support from the school, 2) not aware of support available, and 3) support for students but not for teachers.

**No support from the school.** The majority of the teachers in this study stated that they did not receive any support from their school in regards to serving students who were homeless in their classroom. Many did not ask for support from the school.

When asked, Leon stated that he did not have any training or support from the school he taught at in order to help him with students who were homeless; he also touched on what things may be helpful to know.

Well, I don’t know that, um, the—I actually taught at a school before this and that’s where the first three individuals were at—um, so there weren’t really any supports at that school.

Cory stated that he received support in the form of more additional information about the student. However, he did not receive any support through the school as to how to support these students in the classroom.

Ah, you know, it’s uh, it’s just more about giving the information about the child and telling them where they’re coming from and this is what they deal with every
day. Um, after that you know, I mean support’s kind of a—I don’t know, it’s kind of hard to support some of these children who do come through these, you know, situations. We do have a liaison, or somebody that helps and usually, um, I usually go to that person and say, “Hey, you know, I think this child’s homeless,” and they’ll say, “Oh yes, you know, we know.” Um, I know the schools can’t do too, too much but when it comes to support they pretty much you know, tell me what’s going on, and then I’m kind of able to see the bigger picture of those kids, see the difficulties that they’re going through.

Brian, one of the middle school teachers, stated that the school system was supportive by inviting him to IEP meetings and parent teacher conferences but besides that, he did not receive any advice about how to best educate these students.

Um, really, they didn’t give us advice. Um, you know, when the boy’s parents allowed us to become part of the process for them—you know, go to meetings with him for their IEPs and for other things, parent teacher conferences, he teachers and the administration were all very supportive. Uh, and welcomed us in that process.

**Not aware of what supports are available.** One teacher stated that she did not receive any support from her school and that she was not aware of what resources the school had in place to help her. Therefore, she was not able to state whether there were any resources available.

Researcher: What support, if any, did the school provide for you to help deal with any challenges you faced with these students?
Camy: I don’t really think any…I mean, I think again, like just being able to provide for them as much as you can while they’re at school. So…you know it’s challenging to feel that burden of like taking care of them because they’re not being taken care of…I think it would be nice if the school had like some kind of support group for those kind of kids…I mean, I don’t even know what’s available. I do think that it would be great if there was something available. I think that anything is better than nothing. Um, so I know like when—um like my first couple of years like Ruby Payne’s book about the children—I don’t even remember the name of it…but we all had to read it. You know, and so like trying to—because the school that I worked at, the elementary school that I worked at you know a lot of the kids are below the poverty level there and so they wanted us to read that to be able to relate to them. But like, that wasn’t enough to deal with a
kid like you know, that’s homeless. Um, but like I said anything would be better
than nothing. I don’t know what there is, so I just kind of feel like anything you
want to teach me about them or anyway that you wanna teach me how to relate to
them would help me. Um, but I don’t know that I could tell you specifically. “I
wish I had this.” You know what I mean? Because really, I just wish I had
anything.

Support for students but not for teachers. Some teachers stated that there was
support for the (homeless) students but not for the teachers. Student supports included
fundraising, taking the student shopping and helping the families; however, no special
supports or training were provided to help the teachers educate these students.

Kyle, a 7th grade teacher, discussed some of the resources the student received but
could not touch on any support he received.

Uh, I don’t wanna say zero cause that might sound kind of bad, but um we—it’s a
pretty open door policy, but um they’ve always had an open door policy, if we’ve
had any questions or concerns we can definitely go to them and talk to them about
it. Uh, I know we do a lot of fundraising and trying to find ways to collect things
that families may need so we’ve had that one central location or central support
from them.

Paige, a high school teacher, discussed some of the staff members that these
students and their families go to for assistance as well as a hotline anyone can call for
support.

I mean, I’ve had parents kick kids out who were under 18, so in those situations
we call [Children’s Services]. I always call it. Our counselors are very supportive.
Um, you build relationships with people, our nurse is very helpful. School
psychologists in the past that I’ve worked with, you may be aware of. Um, we
used to have a grads program for teenagers who are parents or are either going to
be parents or are parents. She was a super resource for kids and parents.

Supports, Services, and Training Needed

Participating teachers also touched on what supports, services and training would
be helpful for them to have in order to best assist students who are homeless. Upon
reviewing the transcribed interviews regarding what teachers feel they need in order to be more effective in educating children who are homeless, three themes emerged—1) knowing what homeless means, 2) how to recognize students who are homeless, and 3) knowing what resources are available.

**Knowing what homeless means.** Oftentimes, teachers were at a loss of what classified a student as being homeless. Some teachers believed they had never taught a student who was homeless because they were not aware that so many things could classify a student as homeless.

Kyle, a middle school teacher, stated that he wished he had a better understanding of what homelessness is and what criteria qualifies a student as homeless.

Um, I would think in general maybe um, a better understanding of what, because I know there’s a lot of criteria that are involved to whether or not a student is homeless, so I think a lot of people would be surprised that some students are labeled homeless based on…based on their life but I would think that if we just had maybe a generalization of why a student is considered homeless you know, that would probably help.

Brian, also a middle school teacher, had to be told what classified a student as homeless before he was able to say that he had, in fact, taught a student who was homeless.

Well, I think first of all just recognizing what homeless is, because until you read that definition to me it never…I didn’t know that that’s where it extended to. Um, so just training on being able to recognize it would be great. Um…you know, I don’t—I guess I’m not sure along with that training in how to recognize [when a student is homeless], [what] would be some of the options. Just knowing the options of what we can do. You know, the two situations that I’m describing I really had a relationship with those young men outside of the classroom, which has enabled me to have more involvement with them. Just for my kids that I only see in class you know, okay, what can I do? What should I do?
Paige stated that if teachers were just more aware of how many students are homeless they might be in a better position to assist them. She also stated that teachers need to be aware of what is considered homeless and what is not.

Um, I think even just with teachers if you just do a general, you know, “this percent of the population in any given day is homeless”, um, and maybe what is the definition of homeless? How does it apply to school? How does it apply to social service agencies? You know. Cause what I think of as homeless is probably different than what the drop-in center’s homeless status is.

**How to recognize students who are homeless and approach them.** Along with the definition of homelessness, many teachers are not aware of how to recognize that a student may be homeless. These teachers also have a difficult time with approaching students who are homeless after learning they are homeless.

Leon stated that teachers need to know how to recognize when a student is homeless. Also, when learning that a student is homeless, he emphasized they need to know how to approach and talk to this student about being homeless and how to help them.

Well, I definitely think some training, about how to recognize homeless individuals. I mean, I know that’s probably difficult because everyone’s situation is different, um, but maybe a way to just be able to look for particular signs or um anything that can kind of guide you toward information on whether or not a student is homeless and then proper ways to talk to somebody about that. Um, because as we know, that’s a very difficult situation and you know maybe we’re not prepared you know, exactly how to approach somebody with that.

Cory talked about how it was difficult to know how to approach these students.

Just how to deal with some students who have been in poverty or who have been homeless, you know…and just kinda to deal with the attitudes how to you know, not make them upset or get them sad. Just kinda deal with them and try to figure out what’s the best avenue to help them. I mean you know, of course as teachers you know, days are getting busier and busier for teachers as it is. It’s hard to
really go out and help these kids sometimes especially when you’re faced with you know things on your own.

**Knowing what resources are available.** Two teachers mentioned that they do not know what resources their school has available. One teacher also mentioned that having accessible resources to give to parents might be difficult because some parents may take offense.

Paige, a high school special education teacher, mentioned that many teachers are not aware of what resources are available within and outside a school.

I think that our counselors are so overwhelmed with the number of students they have that even if a teacher notices a difference in a student, you know emailing the counselor to let them know that something’s going on and how soon that counselor’s going to get to that…um teachers are not very aware of the resources we have. Or to be able to prioritize, you know the student you know like on a rate, a rating, you know how high is the need to see. Um, I think if we had the ability to have intervention type meetings, which I want to say we did years ago, you could put a kid’s name in a group meet, um you would have your school nurse, or you would have an administrator, you would have a counselor and teachers could come in and say you know, “I’ve seen this.” I think awareness, making teachers aware; you know, that this is an issue for kids, you know.

Kristy stated that teachers are not aware of how to get resources and also how to give the resources to families without offending them.

You know, knowing how to get resources, or just let them be aware of places that they can go to get things that they might need. Some parents, um, can take offense to getting help, so you have to be very careful about that so the teachers need to be supported by the schools and it may be helpful to send literature home. And then, you know, maybe forms if you would like help, to um, have the parents send that form back. That way you’re not stepping on toes, um, trying to help out when parents don’t want that.
CHAPTER V
DISCUSSION

Review of Purpose and Interpretation of Findings

Research indicates that children who are homeless face many challenges, such as academic difficulties, health problems, behavior struggles and emotional instabilities. Considering the situations of students who are homeless, developing school-based interventions for providers and policy makers should take priority (Kidd & Scrimenti, 2004). Teachers should be aware of the unique needs of homeless children in order to better serve them in the classroom. Research-based recommendations regarding how schools can best support students who are homeless exist; however, few studies identify if and how schools are following these recommendations. The classroom teacher is often the sole person responsible for interventions for these children. If the student is in middle or high school a teacher may only see a student for a short period of the day; he or she may also teach over a hundred students each day. Teachers clearly could benefit from administrator and system-wide support in order to meet the needs of students who are homeless.

In understanding the perceptions teachers have of the supports they receive, as well as the types of training they need, schools may be able to better support teachers in facing the challenges of educating students who are homeless. The challenges these
students face affects not only their quality of life, but also the individuals and systems around them. The current research study may guide state and local agencies to develop a framework that will help to improve the lives of children who are homeless. The purpose of this study was to examine how teachers are informed that a student is homeless, their experiences with this student or multiple students, what support they received, and what support they wish they had received in order to increase their effectiveness of providing an appropriate education. In light of this information, schools may be able to help their teachers provide a more appropriate education, know how to best help students who are homeless, and be able to implement fundamental changes in how to educate these students.

Results of this study indicate there is inconsistency in how teachers are informed that a student is homeless. This is consistent with previous research, which found that sometimes teachers are informed by the student themselves, by the school before the student arrives to class, or by a student’s appearance changing (Mizerek & Hines, 2004). Several participants in this study stated that the student told them they were homeless or that they noticed that the student had changed from when they first met them. On rare occasions, a previous teacher had told the teacher the student was homeless or a member of the staff had told them. Many participants also reported that they felt at a loss of what to say to a student when they noticed something was different about them or after they had been told by the student that they do not have a home. It is evident that schools could benefit from a consistent procedure for informing a teacher that a student is homeless and how to talk to this student about it if the student brings it up. Participants felt that
knowledge of the student’s home life would assist them in developing a better working relationship with the student as well as help the teacher provide the student with appropriate interventions and accommodations within the classroom. Future research will be necessary to determine if disclosing additional information to teachers would, in fact, benefit students who are homeless. Results from the current study implied that teachers were more flexible and focused on what would help these students when they were aware of their home life. Additionally, many teachers described that they were the person the student disclosed to. These teachers felt that if they had been aware of the student’s situation beforehand, then they could have been better prepared for the discussion about the student’s home life.

Participants in this study reported several themes regarding the supports and services they received from schools in order to help them best educate students who are homeless. Specifically, they did not have overt support from the school, they were not aware of the support available, and that support was provided for the students but not for the teachers. The primary theme was a lack of support from the schools. Interestingly, the research reviewed for this project did not specifically address the lack of support for teachers in the school system. Many teachers shared that they were able to somehow support the students who were homeless, but they did not receive any support themselves from the school.

Schools can further help support students who are homeless by:
• Telling teachers before the student arrives that this student is homeless and answer any questions they may have about supporting this student within the classroom

• Providing school supplies for these students as needed

• Informing teachers of helpful accommodations for these students
  o Not assigning homework that requires technology
  o Accepting late work
  o Not changing the room on a frequent basis
  o Providing a space within the classroom for their class materials
  o Time to visit with the school counselor
  o Time to see the school nurse
  o Do not mark the student as tardy since the bus they rode may have come from a long distance away
  o Be flexible and understanding
  o Create a portfolio of the student’s work to go in their permanent folder in case they transfer to another school

• Have cafeteria workers set aside extra food that students do not want and give this extra food to the student who is homeless or the school nurse instead of throwing it away

• Create an enrollment policy that allows students to enroll easily if they do not have a place of residence or available birth certificate
• Find a way to ask if the family is homeless instead of relying solely on the liaison working within the school district

• Provide a script for teachers about what to say when a student discloses that they are homeless

• Inform the teachers within your school about the definition of homelessness and how this may impact the student

• Provide a locker or a place within the nurse’s office for the student to keep clothes inside

• Allow the student and/or the student’s family to use a laundry machine if available within the school

• Allow the student to use the locker rooms in the morning or after school to take a shower

• Teach teachers to recognize the signs that a student is homeless such as having unclean clothing, being frequently hungry, constantly tired and/or saying odd things about what they’re doing that night or if they had moved again

• Make sure that teachers have knowledge of all of the available resources for these students within the community as teachers sometimes have frequent communication with these families

Some teachers reported that there was support from the school, however, they were unaware of what support there was for them as well as the students. In order to best help these students, those that interact with them every day should be informed about the resources that are available to help them. Homeless students may also need increased
access to school-based mental health services, a flexible attendance policy as well as a flexible assignment policy. The support that was available for teachers was an open-door policy for teachers to talk with administration about any difficulties they were having, nurses, counselors and some school psychologists. Many of these teachers reported that the main form of support they received was actually for the students in the form of fundraising and collecting items for these students but no support for the teachers.

One of the questions asked in the interview related to what supports and services would have been helpful at the time when they had a student who was homeless in their class. One point almost every teacher mentioned was lacking the knowledge of the definition of homeless. Many teachers may think a student is not homeless if they are living in a different hotel every night or if they are staying at a relative’s house, and therefore may not think they need additional supports within the classroom. This can adversely impact these students because the teachers are not aware that they need to put interventions in place for these students and the help could come too late. Another support some teachers wished for was being able to recognize the signs that a student is homeless and knowing how to approach them about where their home is. These teachers felt if they knew these signs they could have more information about the student’s life and thereby better help them within the classroom. The last support participants mentioned was a desire to know what resources are in fact available. There is a clear lack of communication between the school system and teachers in the form of resources available to students who are homeless and for the teachers themselves. School districts
and social service agencies should be aware that teachers feel underprepared when faced with educating students who are homeless.

**Limitations**

There are several limitations to this study, beginning with the limited scope of the design. Due to the homogenous setting, the generalizability of this research is limited. The participants consisted of teachers within two different school districts, which helped to vary the experiences reported; however, additional sites may have resulted in more varied experiences reported. The goal in qualitative research is to reach a point of theoretical saturation which, as defined by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2000), is a point in data collection and analysis when new information produces little or no change in the codebook. Due to the geographical and logistical limitations of this study and the participant pool, theoretical saturation could not be reached. It is questionable whether this would be possible even with a much larger sample, because no two teachers’ experience is the same. Another limitation of this study was the fact that elementary school teachers were not interviewed and this could provide many different experiences of teachers.

There is a degree of human interaction within the data-gathering process, which can lead to skewing of the data. The participants who volunteered to be interviewed may have answered the researcher’s questions in a certain way because that way may have been viewed as more favorable or given what they believed the researcher wanted to hear. Additionally, the nature of collecting qualitative data requires inference and
interpretation by the researcher. Verbal responses may be misunderstood or unconscious bias could have existed during the data analysis.

**Implications for Future Research**

By examining the views of teachers who have taught students who were homeless, we can begin to build recommendations for school systems to better educate these students and provide more support to their teachers. The current study’s findings resemble the statements made by Mizerek and Hinz (2004) indicating that students often disclose that they are homeless to teachers. Additionally, this study discovered that there is limited support for teachers at school in regards to educating students who are homeless. Future research is necessary to determine what specific supports within the classroom would be more beneficial for teachers in educating students who are homeless. It would also be beneficial to know if these supports would ultimately impact the student’s educational outcomes. Another study could interview the experiences of teachers located within elementary schools as these teachers encounter students in a completely different setting than middle and high school students.

Teachers are largely unaware of the supports available to them as well as what unique supports students who are homeless need. It is also apparent that teachers need additional training on what classifies a student as homeless. It would also be interesting to see if a student’s behavior within the classroom improves once s/he discloses to a teacher that they are homeless.
Conclusion

The present study investigated the experiences, struggles, and needs of teachers who work with students who are homeless. The findings suggested that teachers have a strong desire to know more about the definition of homelessness, and to know more about the background information of their students. Teachers also desired more support and training from the school system to assist them in supporting students who are homeless.

This study is an important addition to the current literature because it confirms previous findings regarding teachers’ experiences working with students who are homeless. Additionally, it helps to fill the gap highlighted by Moore (2013) noting that few studies have focused on the experiences of teachers who serve students who are homeless. The findings in this study show that teachers need more education on the definition of homelessness, how a student’s homelessness may impact them in the classroom and accommodations teachers can provide to help these students. In addition, findings suggest school systems need to improve collaboration between administrators and teachers in order to provide better support for educators, and ultimately for students. This, in turn, can improve the outcomes of children who are homeless.
REFERENCES


http://www.simplypsychology.org/maslow.html


http://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html


Superintendent of Public Education:


CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

• TITLE OF THE STUDY:

Teachers’ Experiences With Students Who Are Homeless

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Melodie Metze, a school psychology graduate student from the University of Dayton. Your participation in this study is voluntary. Please read the information below, and ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether or not to participate.

• PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study will investigate the experiences, struggles, and needs of teachers who work with students who are homeless.

• PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked questions about your experiences with students who are homeless. Your specific answers will not be shared with anyone else. Your responses will remain anonymous and no information will be shared in reports or presentations that would allow anyone to personally identify your responses. The interview will take place at a time and location that will be at your convenience and in person. The interview should take approximately 45 minutes to complete.

• POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

During the course of your participation in this study, you will be interviewed about your experiences with students who are homeless. You may experience mild anxiety and slight discomfort when recalling struggles or decisions you made with these students.

• ANTICIPATED BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS

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There are no direct benefits to you, however, by participating in this research, you will help to develop understanding of supports for teachers of students who are homeless. This information could help other educators, administrators, and policy makers develop a framework by which schools can meet the needs of the vulnerable homeless youth population.

**PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

You will receive a $5 gift card in appreciation of your participation.

**CONFIDENTIALITY**

When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no information will be included that would reveal your identity without your permission. The interview process and your responses will be audio-recorded for later analysis, and your identity will be disguised and protected. Your name will not be revealed in any document resulting from this research. Your data will be recorded anonymously. A pseudonym will be recorded with your data; your name or other identification will not be recorded with the data. When the research thesis is completed, the audio-recordings will be destroyed.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you choose not to participate, that will not affect your relationship with the University of Dayton or other services to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice or penalty. The researcher may also terminate your participation in this research if she feels this to be in your best interest.

**IDENTIFICATION OF RESEARCHER**

If you experience any kind of discomfort as a result of your participation in this study, or if you have questions about the research, contact Melodie Metze (primary researcher) at 360-286-7267 or metzem1@udayton.edu.

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions about this research, please contact Melodie Metze, primary researcher and graduate student at metzem1@udayton.edu or Susan Davies, Ed.D., Thesis Chair and Associate Professor with the University of Dayton at 937-229-3652 or sdavies1@udayton.edu.

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**
If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Dayton Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, Mary Connolly, PhD, (937) 229-3493, Mary.Connolly@notes.udayton.edu, Kettering Laboratories Room 542, 300 College Park Dr., Dayton, OH 45469-0104.

**SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

I have read the information provided above. I have been given an opportunity to ask questions and all of my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have been given a copy of this form. In signing this form, I certify that I am at least eighteen years of age.

Name of Participant (please print) _________________________________

Address________________________________________________________

Signature of Participant ________________________________________ Date___________

**SIGNATURE OF WITNESS**

My signature as witness certifies that the participant signed this consent form in my presence.

Name of Witness (please print)_________________________________________________

Signature of Witness______________________________________________________

Date___________
APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Please complete this questionnaire and return it to the interviewer. If you have any questions, please ask them. All information that you provide will be kept confidential.

1. **Current Teaching Assignment**: (check all that apply)
   
   ___ K  ___ 1  ___ 2  ___ 3  ___ 4  ___ 5  ___ 6
   
   ___ 7  ___ 8  ___ 9  ___ 10  ___ 11  ___ 12

   ___ General Education

   ___ Special Education

2. **Years of Teaching Experience**

   _____ Years of teaching

   _____ Years in current assignment

3. **What subjects and grade levels have you taught?**

   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________

   __________________________________________
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question type</th>
<th>Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductory comments</td>
<td>“Thank you for your willingness to participate in this interview with me. My name is Melodie and I am a school psychologist graduate student. As you know from our previous discussions, I am completing a thesis project that seeks to gain knowledge about teachers’ experiences working with children who are homeless. Your participation today is voluntary and you can stop the interview at any time. All I ask is that you provide honest answers and I am looking forward to hearing about your experiences. Do you have any questions before we get started?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opening introductory</td>
<td>“Talk to me about why you’re a teacher.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“To your knowledge, do you currently have a child who is homeless in your class?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>If answer is no: “Have you had a student in your class who was homeless in the past?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transition</td>
<td>“Tell me about your experience with that student or students.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Please describe any challenges that arose in relation to this student being in your class.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key

- “Talk to me about why you’re a teacher.”
- “What are your previous experiences with homelessness is?”
- “Over the course of your years teaching, about how many students have you taught who’ve been homeless?”
- “How long have you or did you know(n) this student?”
- “How long has it been since you’ve taught this student?”
- “How did you learn that the student was homeless?”
- “What support, if any, did the school provide to you to help deal with those challenges?”
- “What supports, services, or training do you believe would help you (or other teachers) be more effective with students who are homeless?”

Ending

“Is there anything I’ve missed that you would like to share regarding your experience with children who are homeless?”
“Will you please fill out this demographic sheet regarding your teaching experience and assignment?”

Conclusion

- In 2-3 minutes, briefly summarize the main points of the interview and ask if the summary is accurate.
- When summary is completed, say, “Is there anything I’ve missed that you would like to share regarding your experience with children who are homeless?”
- Once additional comments are addressed say, “Thank you for participating in this interview with me. Please accept this gift card as a token of my appreciation.”