



An Education Foundations Course and Teacher Research: Addressing the Impact of Local Homelessness on Education

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Abstract

Homeless education is studied through qualitative teacher research. This article reports the perspectives and experiences of a school administrator, social worker, teacher, and Family Shelter school-to-shelter liaison in describing their experiences with homeless elementary students and their parents. College faculty did the research to prepare for a teacher education foundations course for preservice teachers.

Keywords: *homeless education, k-12 education, homeless immigrant education, social foundations teacher education, teacher research*

Introduction

Our changing community: food banks with empty shelves unable to provide enough food for families during the summer months when children are out of school; men and women on street corners across town holding signs pleading for money, food or shelter; and, five homeless shelters all over capacity. Additional community challenges include complications such as language and cultural barriers that arise with an influx of refugees to the shelters, and stereotypes of the homeless that pollute the community, largely uneducated on the shelter population and issues surrounding homelessness. Our campus: a small Lutheran liberal arts college consisting primarily of white middle to upper class individuals. The dilemma: how to assist our students, teacher education majors, in understanding the realities of life for children and parents who are poor, diverse, and homeless.

An Education Foundations Course

Our students are teacher education majors preparing for careers in elementary, middle, and secondary schools. Social justice is valued on our campus, a liberal arts college of approximately 2,700 students in the upper mid-west. Service projects and service learning bring students into the larger community in varied ways, some day-long events and others involving commitment over time.

For our students to not only meet the college's mission of being responsibly engaged in the world, but to teach well, it is important that they prepare to interact with the diverse families of the students they will serve. *Education 212: American Education in a Diverse Society*, is the initial foundations course in their curriculum. In that semester-long experience, which includes a field

placement in an English language learning classroom, students read about and research the ethnic backgrounds of public school children in the United States. They investigate and present contemporary as well as historical issues. But, we came to recognize that the local issue of homelessness and homeless education were not being adequately addressed through students' reading, research, and class presentations.

We read articles on homeless education, discussed the McKinney-Vento Act (<http://www.naehcy.org>), and watched The PBS *Frontline* documentary *Poor Kids* (www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/poor-kids) which follows five rural Iowa families as they lose their housing and resettle into motels or shelters. These provided a glimpse into homelessness, but our role as educators and the reality of working with homeless students was left relatively untouched. Clearly the impact of poverty and homelessness on a child or adolescent in school is powerful and must be considered by educators. Shepard and Booth (2009) wrote "...studies have documented that pre-service teachers from White, middle-class, and monolingual backgrounds tend to have stereotypical beliefs or misunderstandings toward children from diverse backgrounds" (p. 162). To avoid this, our students who for the most part matched this description needed to become closer to the issues.

A small group of our students, members of Education Club, have an extended and active involvement as volunteers at Family Shelter. Children must be supervised by an adult when in the shelter's playroom. When student volunteers supervise and interact with children, parents can conduct job searches or meet other responsibilities. Without help from volunteers, toddlers may spend most of the day in a stroller while parents attend to pressing personal needs. These Education Club students developed an understanding of the circumstances surrounding homeless children's lives and the impact these circumstances can have on their education and well-being. But we need all students, not just a select few, to leave with this understanding. Somehow our students needed to be let into the lives of homeless children and adolescents. Before we could help them become more deeply immersed in the issue, we need to immerse ourselves.

The purpose of our research, including a literature review, observation in the public schools and at the family shelter, and through interview, is to understand the impact of homelessness on children's education. In our study, individuals, as well as the metro-community, school, shelter, and college, is given a pseudonym.

Methodology

Numbers and percentages give important insights. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) remind researchers that "...qualitative methods refer to *what kind*, and quantitative methods to *how much of a kind*" (p. 117). The numbers of homeless children, grades 1-5, attending Red River Elementary, tell us that the school absorbs a high number of transient students. And, the numbers of individuals at Family Shelter suggest a crowded environment, but we needed to know more. We needed to know the experiences of the homeless children and the impact those experiences have on children and school.

Comprehending the ways in which children—those who are homeless and their peers in classrooms—are touched each day by the issue of homelessness requires listening to people's stories. Because all of the elementary-aged children living at Family Shelter attend Red River Elementary, interviews with the school principal, classroom teachers, and school social worker are essential. Family Shelter's Community Coordinator offers an invaluable perspective, giving us a look at the daily lives and shelter routines the children experience before and after school. We

included a walking-tour interview in order to see the shelter space and meet mothers and pre-school children during the day. (Our interviews did not include talking directly with parents or children at the shelter, because our focus was on the public school.)

Interview was our research tool. Prepared interview questions began conversations, but follow-up questions and stories took us further. Open-ended questions allowed participants to help guide the conversations. Participants were interviewed individually. After the interview questions were specifically answered, more generalized conversation began. Conversation moved from what experiences are in public schools, family shelters, and teacher education programs, involving homeless education, to what more needs to be or could be done in each of the settings, particularly through partnerships. Each participant was interviewed twice and added additional information and stories during a panel presentation at a Vocation Retreat held for education students later.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) further remind us that “good research is research that works” (p. 51). In our research we interviewed adults whose work connects them to the lives and needs of homeless children and adolescents daily. The interviews and conversations became texts for examination and the resulting reflective narrative uses story to describe and explain our findings. Lyons and Kubler LaBoskey (2002) confirm that narrative provides “...a way of gathering up knowledge of practice, simply, a way of knowing...” (p. 3). They continue, “As inquiry, narrative involve[s] an intentional reflective process...constructing and telling the story of its meaning, and predicting how this knowledge might be used in the future” (pp. 2-3). Our research is put to work teaching education majors, who, in turn, will teach diverse populations of children and teenagers, some of whom will be in poverty and some of whom will be homeless.

Meeting the Interview Participants

Principal Matt Olson, an experienced administrator of 16 years, is in his early forties. He holds eye contact intensely, his full attention given to whomever he is talking with. Mr. Olson made a career decision to always work in schools with diverse populations and high percentages of students identified as being of low socioeconomic status. Energy, commitment, communication, and an extraordinarily high value on relationship are qualities of his leadership. Matt Olson has been the principal at Red River Elementary School since 2011. An athlete himself, Mr. Olson coaches community youth hockey, baseball, and football.

Travis Larson, with his quiet and calming presence, has been teaching third grade at Red River Elementary for four years. In our conversations it is difficult to image him rattled. Travis is centered and flexible. In addition to his teaching duties, he leads the after school intramural activities and assists with the fifth-grade student leadership program at Red River Elementary School.

Natalie Johnson works for the school district as a school/shelter liaison. In her role, she facilitates communication between parents at the shelter, the schools, and various service agencies. Her investment and enthusiasm for her work is obvious. Natalie’s words tumble over each other, and she is both realistic and idealistic in talking about the lives of homeless children.

Laurie Nelson, quiet, organized, and dedicated, was newly in her position of Family Shelter Community Coordinator when we met her. Previously she worked in fund raising for a private college. But, at our initial interview, only three months into her work at the shelter, she provided a wealth of insight into the life of the children there. A parent herself, Laurie’s concern for everyone at the shelter is professional yet personable, and she takes seriously children’s developmental

and social needs. Laurie is an educator at the shelter for parents and children, helping in myriad and unanticipated ways each day.

Understanding Our Students' Initial Thoughts on Home, School, and Homelessness

To help us understand what our students think and feel about the concepts of home, school, and homelessness, we used Prospect's Descriptive Process for a Reflection activity (Himley, 2002). The process is more than a free-association list, though it appears that simple. Participants list thoughts and feelings—their personal connotations and memories—of a concept, then each shares and explains his or her list. A note-taker thematizes the lists and notes from verbal explanations. The written compilation becomes a text to be interpreted. It serves us as a resource, giving us insight into our students' experiences and prior knowledge about home, school, and homelessness. Having these understandings prepares us to help students make needed comparisons and contrasts to the experiences and knowledge of the homeless students in their future classrooms. The compilation of Reflections gives us insight into what our students, who by in large experienced lives of privilege as children and adolescents, value. Knowing our students' values helps us shape questions to consider what is different—not what is more or less moral, but what is different—or homeless children and youth. A brief summary of our teacher education students' thoughts and feelings on home, school, and homelessness appears below:

Our students understood “home” to be personally their own, a place for my things, my bed, my bedroom, my family, my pets. Inside their homes were spaces for family, friends, cousins, and meals made every day by mom or made for special holiday occasions by everyone. One student mentioned the smell of home. Listening to music, watching movies, finishing homework, playing card games, and resting were activities at home. Home felt safe, comfortable, welcoming. Home extended into the yard as well. Bonfires, football games, basketball in the driveway, fixing food on the grill, putting on backyard skits, and enjoying neighborhood block parties were part of students' reflections on home. Pets—dogs, cats, turtles—and their particular names were part of the family inside and outside the home.

“School” was associated with subject areas, some positive and some less so, and memories of favorite teachers, adults who cared and nurtured our students through elementary, high school, and college. Friendships formed at school, as well as teams, and collaborations involving school activities such as choir, band, debate, football, basketball, and wrestling appeared on our students' lists. Coaching relationships were sometimes likened to parenting. Travel with teams and organizations provided adventure. The accouterments of school—classrooms, desks, libraries, books and computers, and locker rooms—were remembered as plentiful. School lunches received mixed reviews and laughter. Our students reflected on learning to manage time and learning to research. For a small number of our students, school brought memories of bullying and fighting with friends, but overwhelmingly, for our group of teacher education students, school was a positive place where they were successful and had fun.

Our education students thought of “homelessness” with regard to where people spend the night. They listed shelters, park benches, cardboard boxes, under freeways, in cars, and on the street as places to sleep. People's need for food was on students' minds, appearing on their lists in words such as hungry, soup kitchens, and food stamps. Homelessness was associated with being dirty or wearing dirty clothing. Feelings and emotions such as insecurity, anxiety, uncertainty,

being scared, lonely, sad, and desperate were identified. One student identified "enormous appreciation for those who care." Safety and a need for protection from street crime were specified. Finally our students listed alcohol, drugs, and addiction when considering homelessness.

The Reflection gives us cause to consider our students' emotions, experiences, and values about home when developing our interview questions. What does having a home mean to them? In thinking about this, how would students without stable housing respond to the same reflective question, what would be missing, and what would be added? In the same vein, considering the themes that arise around the concept of school, what might be different about responses from homeless students? What, that our students experienced and valued, might be altered or eliminated because of the circumstances surrounding homelessness? These considerations help us in beginning to consider what we need to ask to ascertain an understanding of how circumstances surrounding homelessness impact experiences and values in the context of school.

The Community

The school and shelter are in Plainsville, a small mid-western city with a population of 39,398 and a sister city that, together, creates a metro-community with a population of 248,237 people. The median income of the community as a whole is \$50,088. The metro-community includes two state universities, a private college, and several two-year colleges. There is technology and medical industry, and booming construction, but agriculture is the region's economic engine. Within the metro-community there are five shelters for the homeless. Three are for single men and one is for women and children. The shelter with which we worked, Family Shelter in Plainsville, is the only one to offer housing for entire families in addition to single men and single women.

The homeless population in the community underwent change in the past 10 years. Of particular impact was the recent oil boom three hundred miles west of the metro-community. With so many jobs available, Laurie, the shelter's Community Relations and Communication Director (personal communication, August 19, 2014), recalls, "People came with nothing but a car." As the jobs began drying up, people were left with nothing and came to the metro-community, ending up at the shelter. An additional change is the ongoing influx of refugee immigrant New American families in the community sponsored by Lutheran Social Services. As Laurie, explains, "Homelessness isn't an issue alone now in this community. It's homelessness with English Language Learner needs. This is a change in the last five years. It's gone from a mentally ill population to a refugee and New American population." While there are services provided for those with the designation New American, if they move from the state where they were initially placed, they lose support. Given that the metro-community is divided by state lines, individuals often do not understand that, even though they may be moving only a mile, it can significantly impact the support they are provided. Laurie, informs us that "many shelter residents lost 'New American' status because they moved to the community from their initial locations in the United States, and with the loss of designation comes the loss of services." The loss of this support leads many families to turn to the shelter. An additional issue with New Americans, Natalie tells us, is that "Families are now in the shelter for longer periods of time than they were five or six years ago," because

immigrant families tend to be larger than typical American families, making suitable housing more difficult to find.

In discussing the changes in the face of homelessness in Plainsville, Natalie expresses concerns regarding the community's perception of the homeless. "The public hasn't been well educated. There is a perception that the families at Family Shelter would be involved with crime and selling drugs, etc. But, in reality, the families involved with drugs would be staying with [other] families because they wouldn't be able to follow the rules to stay at the shelter."

In the city of Plainsville there are three elementary schools, but all students from the homeless shelter are enrolled at Red River Elementary. Red River is a K-5 school that during the 2014-15 school year served 812 students, 37 of whom lived at the homeless shelter. Even though, as the principal states, "75% of the shelter population have heavy need for extra services", no additional funding is provided by the district. The school previously had a state grant to fund a school liaison to assist the homeless families but lost the \$30,000 to inner-city schools where the percentage of homeless students was higher. Because there is no longer any additional funding or support provided by the state or district to help these students, building administrators must create solutions using what they already have.

The Shelter

As previously stated, Family Shelter is the metro-community's only shelter where entire families can be housed together. In the 2014-2015 school year, Family Shelter was home to 145 children and adolescents, 57 of whom were English Language Learners and New Americans.

Family Shelter uses a building that once was a furniture store. The repurposed space features large windows on one side and a full basement. There is a dormitory for single men, a dormitory for single women, and nine family rooms (one-room family bedrooms). There is a separate lounge area for families and one for single men and women to share, as well as the dining room which doubles as a community room for all. Everyone at the shelter, regardless of age, is required to be indoors by 10:00 p.m. Use of alcohol and drugs is prohibited. (There is a wet shelter for men in the metro-community.) Scheduled meals are served by volunteers.

Laurie, the shelter's Community Coordinator, meets us at Starbucks for her first interview. It is back-to-school time and she comes from helping a Somali mother and her children who have just moved from the shelter to their own apartment—relationship binds Laurie to them, though they no longer are affiliated with the shelter. "The community is good about providing free haircuts and the YMCA's Backpack Program is great for school supplies, but there just isn't affordable housing. The community needs to be better educated about the need for housing people can afford," she tells us.

"Consistency is what is most needed," Laurie tells us regarding the children's lives at Family Shelter. She echoes the words of the school principal and classroom teacher who told us that routine is impacted by homelessness and that school is a setting that can provide routine in children's lives.

Laurie tells us that "a fair number" of parents living at the shelter work. Their work lives and children's school lives intersect, but not always for the best. "Families sometimes can't sustain jobs because of the intensity of their children's behavior at school. Mom loses her apartment because she has to keep picking her child up from school and loses income or loses her job completely," she explains. Children and adolescents cannot be unattended at Family Shelter, so anytime a child is sick or sent home because of behavior issues, a parent must be at the facility with

the child. Adolescents are more likely to have already given up on their family and be couch-hopping with friends, Laurie adds. “Few adolescents beyond age 15 or 16 stay long at the shelter with their families. But these elementary aged children are still so hopeful,” she mentions.

“Any kind of enrichment is hard for families,” Laurie tells us. Ordinary activity such as help with homework and bedtime reading is difficult. English language skills can be a barrier to parents’ ability to help children or teens with homework. There is no wireless internet connection for students’ whose homework may require it. Family Shelter offers three family bathrooms with tubs, but with the number of children and families at the shelter, parents’ time to talk and play with children during nighttime bathing routines is limited. With what many middle-class families consider necessities in family life—homework encouragement, bedtime reading, bath-time bonding and language skills development—at a premium, it is not surprising that volunteers provide the majority of enrichment the children at the shelter enjoy. Summer 4-H Club and college students’ volunteer services for Saturday Art are among the activities that add to the children’s life experiences.

Shelter Life

In working with our preservice teachers we heard their reflected associations with the concept of home. Terms like “safe, comfortable, pets, my own room” filled the lists. But for us their responses begged the question, what was life like for the students whose current home was the shelter, and how could that impact their school experience?

“One of our biggest concerns for homeless children is the stability of their housing,” Natalie reflects. The atmosphere at any shelter, even with the best intentions of everyone involved, would, by definition, be impermanent. Our findings matched those of Hinton and Cassel (2013) who wrote, “Living in shelters can cause families with young children to feel insecure and vulnerable” (p. 458). As Principal Olson states, “The cycle of poverty is so vicious, and students bounce from school and locale, to school and locale. School is a good place for them.”

Family Shelter works to provide stability for families by creating more affordable housing, but efforts so far have failed. While Family Shelter owns land and plans to build an apartment complex with affordable units, and rules similar to those at the shelter, the initial presentation to Plainsville was not well received. Under pressure to meet a deadline for a major grant, Family Shelter administrators worked diligently on the planning but rushed the time for community comment. “It was not explained well,” Laurie says. She indicates that the neighborhood did not understand that the apartment complex would have the same rules as the family shelter and that there would be much more scrutiny on residence behavior than any private rental company could impose. The grant opportunity was lost because of community objection to the location of the future complex. Laurie indicates that the overwhelming neighborhood sentiment was, “Not in my backyard.” Family Shelter still owns the land and will work to move forward with better community communication when a new grant opportunity is found. Until that time instability of housing remains a reality in the metro-community. Desmond (2016) writes, “Universal housing programs have been successfully implemented all over the developed world. In countries that have such programs, every single family with an income below a certain level who meets basic program requirements has a right to housing assistance” (p. 309). Laurie talks with us about her determination to help educate the citizens of Plainsville and to try to see the project to fruition.

In a similar vein of discussion Mr. Olson reflects on a feeling of anxiety that any community likely has about homeless people in general. “Every community wants them out...no one

wants the problem. But school dropouts will offend somewhere, if they drop out.” He provides an example of homeless students from his previous elementary school, whom he now recognizes in their mugshots on the nightly news reports when charged for burglary or drug offenses. “With kids bouncing around from schools and locations, they will probably drop out and will probably offend in the future. Society needs to deal with them in other ways,” Mr. Olson tells us. He feels strongly that school can make a difference for these students, and he has seen it happen, but it takes consistency and time. With regard to this, Mr. Olson states, “Keeping kids at your school for a year—you can do a lot—if they can be there every day.”

Mr. Olson’s deepest concern for some of the shelter children at Red River Elementary relates to what they see and are exposed to at the shelter daily. Family Shelter is crowded with strangers and there are volatile families that are embattled with other shelter families, and the children bring these issues to school. A further concern is that Family Shelter houses single men, and “some are offenders or shady characters,” he tells us. “The community should question this hard,” Mr. Olson says, “I would rather see a women’s and children’s shelter.” Hinton and Cassel (2013) found that “homeless families reported not feeling as ‘safe and secure’ in their environment as compared to housed families” (p. 458). Jonathan Kozol (2012) wrote that “children in New York City living with mothers at the Martinique Hotel, a homeless shelter, were exposed to “...the pervasive atmosphere of insecurity and high anxiety...” (p. 6). Going on to speculate about lasting effects, Kozol (2012) asked, “...what enduring influence all of this would have upon the capability of children...to believe in any kind of elemental decency in people who have power over their existence. Would they later find it hard to trust [and respect] the teachers in their public schools?” (p. 8-9).

Travis mentions some of the effects in students’ lives from being at Family Shelter. “There is trauma that is sometimes unidentified, and basic needs are not met because of the absence of routine,” he explains. “Children come to Red River Elementary ...tired from sleeping on the floor with people walking through the area. Although there are healthy meals provided at the shelter, many students suffer from hunger. Unfamiliar with “American cuisine” many children will not eat what is provided.” While one would assume that the mothers could prepare more traditional meals for their children, because of health code regulations they are not allowed in the kitchen. In addition food is not allowed to be kept in the family rooms for sanitation reasons so many children are “not eating because they don’t like the shelter food and parents let them not eat.” Natalie adds. Of course hunger and the related fatigue complicate concentration and behavior problems at school.

The inability for children to focus on and care about school is often difficult because there are too many issues clouding their minds. Natalie notes, “These kids know too much about big people’s problems like bills, paychecks, evictions.” Beginning a sentence he does not finish, Mr. Olson reflects, “what these shelter kids see and are exposed to at the shelter—volatile situations, crowding, drugs and alcohol, violence...They need to be in school for their lives and their education to improve.”

Lack of privacy is an issue overall in life at a shelter. In Plainsville, the school bus stops directly at Family Shelter. “With the bus stopping at the shelter, all the kids know who the shelter kids are,” Mr. Olson explains. Due to assumptions often made about the nature of homeless students, there can, on occasion, be conflict in which it is easy for non-shelter students to blame those living at the shelter. Natalie comments that some emotional wounds come from shelter vs. non-shelter interactions between children. She recalls,

A 12-year old girl returned to Family Shelter crying and crying because of being accused of something she had not done. You know how you just know when a child is telling the truth? It was a shelter vs. non-shelter conflict. A non-shelter child at a summer YMCA program had misbehaved and blamed the shelter child. The Y teacher had been told there were witnesses. But the experience was crushing this sweet girl's spirit. I looked her in the eye and gave her a hug and said "I believe you." Her kind-hearted, sweet-spirited father now was worried that his daughter would be punished.

A situation such as this leaves the parent feeling powerless to help his child. Hinton and Cassel (2013) wrote, "[S]helter conditions [and being known to live at a shelter] can...hinder parents' feelings of control and independence over one's own life" (p. 458).

With all of the challenges and insecurity surrounding life at the shelter, individuals interviewed still believed that school can make a difference for these children. "Life is crazy. School is a good place to be," Natalie observes. For Travis, what stands out is the determination some children show in their education.

There was one child who had a house but was borderline homeless. It would be 40-degrees in the house. He lived just beyond the bus route so walked to school and would be there at 7:00 a.m. watching cartoons in the lobby when I got to school,

he tells us. For Travis, this represented the resilience students can demonstrate when provided with a stable welcoming environment at school. As Shepard and Booth (2009) write, "Healing for them does not come from talking about their trauma in isolation, but from being in a structured community that enables them to have healthy relationships and develop a sense of accomplishment..." (p. 15).

How Homelessness Affects Everyone at School

When a homeless child arrives at Red River Elementary everyone is affected. A new, unique individual enters the school community, and, their needs must be met immediately. "The presence of the homeless students impacts the overall student population," Mr. Olson tells us, going on to say that secretaries, teachers, paras, counselors, special education teachers, custodial and lunchroom staff, students, and administrators are impacted. In one recent school year, Travis, a third-grade teacher, had eight homeless children come and go from his classroom.

Because homeless students come to school with immediate needs for special services, students already placed in Title 1 programs, are often removed to make room for the new students. Mr. Olson says,

These are heavy hitters who need immediate help and Title 1 services. Some of the students from more stable families, who clearly need and benefit from Title 1 help, get bumped from support services because the homeless students have critical, immediate needs.

As Hinton and Cassel (2013) note, "Developmental delays, such as below average vocabulary, an inability to focus, or issues of anger and resentment towards life may be present," (p. 463). Still,

Plainsville offers no additional or special funds to Red River Elementary, even though it is the school with the highest number of homeless children because the shelter falls within its boundaries.

Travis tells us that “there is a loss of learning time for the full class when a new student arrives because of the need to reteach all the classroom and school procedures.” Nevertheless he optimistically comments, “The day when a new homeless student comes to school is not a lost day for the others, but it is a day when I spend more time with the new child and spend a lot of time repeating instructions.”

How a homeless child behaves is noticed by peers and adults in school. The magnitude of the impact on the class depends considerably on the new child’s behavior. “Discipline and behavior is huge. When they come in, they can tear it [the expectations and routine] apart,” Travis reflects. Remembering one transient student newly arrived from California, Travis tells the story of a child who was “wilder than wild.”

The other children in the classroom wanted him gone. Kids didn’t like him. He couldn’t help his behavior when he was missing his meds. He was ADHD and couldn’t keep his hands off other kids and had outbursts of yelling. This child started out rough,

he explained. But with time, compassion, and support can come change. After a significant number of months in Travis’ third grade classroom, the child moved to another school in the district. Travis saw him at a sporting event, and the boy called out to him that he missed Red River Elementary.

Reflecting on student relationships in the classroom Travis states, “Other children know who the shelter kids are. Often they are shy and kids accept them if they are acting like everyone else. But if their behavior is way off of school behavior—biting, hitting, shouting—then not so much.” Discussing his appreciation for the diverse population of the school, he comments, “My third graders aren’t living in bubbles. They learn that people are people. I think we are doing something right. We have the country club neighborhood and the shelter kids together [at the school].” Smiling and reflecting on a story of acceptance Travis shares, “There was a third grader from Somalia playing soccer at recess, and, for that short time, he was just a kid, not a homeless kid.”

Helping everyone at school adjust and make the most of their time and talent requires teachers and administrators who understand diversity, including the differing needs that come with being homeless. In addition to school staff, families involved in the school and community need to grow in their understandings of diverse populations. As noted by Shepard and Booth (2009), “Homeless children and their families have been either invisible in school or blamed for the weaknesses and defects in their learning” (p. 162). For Mr. Olson, as well as for Natalie, the school social worker, educating teachers, families, and children is a critical part of their jobs.

Meeting Needs

Children at the shelter face insecurity, safety issues, lack of sleep, hunger, and trauma. These are significant needs that must be addressed by the school. With each child and situation being unique, needs may vary greatly. The school must be vigilant in gathering as much information as possible about the children, their history and their family situation, to be able to effectively address these concerns. Natalie, the social worker, notes that communication is even more

difficult when working with New Americans. She contrasts that experience with that of local families. “With local homeless families, it is often easier to have communication and to have a relationship with parents. It’s easier to help teach parents what’s good for kids because it is easier to communicate.”

Travis stresses the importance of securing a student’s file as soon as it becomes available and scouring through to learn as much as you can about his or her previous school and family background. For some students, files with histories from former schools may follow them to their new location, including academic records, needs, and experiences. For others no such file exists and the process of establishing an understanding can begin only through discussion with the parent and child. Travis notes, “Communication with parents is difficult. One child’s [parents] had five cell [phone] numbers in a school year. I wanted to let parents know something he was good at, but there was no working phone.”

Given the limited amount of information that generally accompanies children on the first day of school, knowing how to best meet student needs is often difficult for the school and teachers. As Natalie indicates, “ELL children often come to school with no specific birthdate to help us assess before making a classroom placement. We have to enroll them with very little information and try to make the placement successful.” While Natalie is extremely supportive of the benefits the law provides for students and their families, she expresses concerns that “McKinney Vento limits opportunity for success because placements happen without full information.” She also indicates that “the tricky part for an administrator is which teacher to put a transient child with—which teacher and what class size.” When and if the school finally receives the information they need, they are often hesitant to move the child to a different classroom. As Mr. Olson states, “At that point you just want them to have some consistency and moving to a new classroom with a new teacher and students is more than they need to handle.”

Establishing trusting relationships with both students and families is a continuing theme in meeting students’ needs. Natalie indicates the first step is actually getting the parents into the school building. She shares one strategy, “Bringing parents to the school to see what it looks like helps establish parents’ understanding of where their children are going during the day.” Some immigrant parents have no context for what a school might be like and the personal visit is an attempt to try and “demystify school for them.”

Communication between school and home is a known factor in student success. Most schools now provide some sort of computerized system intended to assist parents in tracking the children’s grades, assignments and announcements that relate to school experience. While theoretically these online tools, such as PowerSchool, are intended to enhance school communication with parents, for the families at the shelter it is often an additional barrier. Because many of the parents do not have the skill to use it, the school secretaries at Red River work with parents in the office to assist them in establishing an account. Mr. Olson voices his frustration with complexities indicating that he himself, an administrator in the district, struggled in getting his children’s accounts established.

Travis also offers several suggestions for establishing relationships with parents. “Share positives, take time to call parents; spend time in the hallways with parents when students first come to the school.” Natalie indicates that parents are often scared of contact from the school, “They see a 284 number and know it is coming from the school, so they don’t answer.” In one situation Travis managed to circumvent this issue. A child’s parents had refused all invitations to come to the school and meet with him. As an incentive Travis offered 30 Dojo Points (part of a classroom reward system) to the child for bringing his parent to school. The following day “the

third grader came down the hall practically dragging a parent to get those points,” Travis tells us. Making these connections is an essential component of student success. As Travis states, “There’s a lot you can get done when parents will work with you.”

As if there are not enough barriers and challenges with being transient, there are additional consequences for students with special needs. Natalie informs us that, “Children from the shelter are under-identified for needs and services because attendance is an exclusionary factor.” “Many of the children (ages 5-12) had low academic skills and a history of poor attendance related to frequent moves and homelessness” (Shepard and Booth, 2009, p. 13). While teachers and administrators may be aware that students should be able to be identified and qualify for special service, Natalie indicates, “The school can’t label a child with a specific learning disability if they can show lack of attendance [as a factor].” Because of this teachers and administrators have to develop creative solutions in attempt to meet all children’s needs regardless of qualifying labels. As Principal Olson was quoted earlier in the article stating, “You have to work against the rules, moving paras and services around. You do what you do because you have to live with it. You can’t just sit behind a desk and make a budget schedule.”

Many of the issues that arise with the homeless students are unpredictable and each case varies greatly. Because of this there is no set formula that can be applied to enculturate all students to the school, so teachers and administration often have to problem solve as they go. Mr. Olson shares a unique example of this involving three homeless siblings new to the school. The three Somali siblings needed enculturation into school life, as well as English language instruction. They would not sit in classrooms, but rather ran through the school, head-butting and biting other children and teachers. The boys thought standing on top of the toilet seat was the appropriate way to urinate. This was obviously a complicated scenario and required more than one strategic approach. A picture book was created to introduce people in the school and elements of the school day to the boys. The book also contained pictures representing behavioral expectations and consequences. Mr. Olson shares,

There was a picture of me, in my office, and an empty chair. If students act out, they have to come to sit in the chair to talk with Mr. Olson. I told them if you bite, you sit here. If you hit, you sit here. It was a tough start for these children and the others in their classrooms. The initial aim was to help these children learn what it was to be in school.

After several weeks using the picture book as a guide and many interactions with Mr. Olson, the boys found success in the school environment. Unfortunately, as is often the case, the family moved to a new apartment outside of the school’s boundaries. Again the children were uprooted from the environment in which they had become comfortable to begin the process again. This is always of concern because, as Natalie indicated, “Continued change and instability impacts [students’] ability to connect with adults and can’t establish long-term friendships with children.”

In reference to the uniqueness of each situation Mr. Olson replies, “We are finding and creating case-by-case solutions.” Natalie discusses the lack of routine with highly mobile students indicating, “It takes a lot of work to get new kids into a routine. It requires special help to accommodate them.” Mr. Olson adds, “There is a need for enculturation into school for students. I wish there was a class that would help with social skill instruction—general practices, what school is like, how school works, behavior that’s expected.” There is no funding for such an orientation class, so the school tries to develop a variety of methods to meet incoming students transitional needs. One approach the school has embraced to assist in student acculturation is coaching fifth

grade leadership team members to act as guides and peer mentors for students new to the school. Mr. Olson feels that having an immediate peer connection is a key element of becoming comfortable in one's surroundings. While enculturation into the school is a long and difficult process, as Mr. Olson states, "If you can keep these kids for a year, you can help them."

In reference to the individuals she works with Natalie, the social worker states, "Our teachers are so loving, and embracing, and supportive and, knowing this will be hard, they are so kind and loving. They get it." While this loving kindness, and support are essential characteristics for teachers working the shelter children, Travis feels that there is an additional element that is essential. Discussing how he handled the rapid overturn of homeless students in his classroom he indicated, "The teachers who don't feel comfortable with plans being interrupted, day-planners that don't get signed, and homework that doesn't come back to school do struggle." He recognizes and accepts that there are larger issues facing these children and that punishing or shaming students for things that may be out of their control is counterproductive. If work isn't finished when they return to school he works to accomplish as much as they can during the school day.

Clearly understanding the importance of his relationship with students to student learning Travis states,

Flexibility is a key word. For me, life goes on. I just try to make the most of their time in school. Reading and math scores aren't going to improve except in the classroom. You're not going to go anywhere with wishing for more. People are people.

He is confident that flexibility is what allows him to address unique needs and apply limitations to those accommodations as well. "I try to accommodate a child's need. If you are a little tired, tell me, and you can sleep in the nurse's office. But, if you are yelling in the classroom, that won't work here." Students have a clear understanding of Travis' expectations. They understand that flexibility will be granted for their learning and their needs, but disruption of the learning environment within the classroom is non-negotiable. As his principal, Mr. Olson states, "Travis is honest with kids. He doesn't just send kids to the office. He lets kids know he likes them but that expectations are expectations." As noted by Shepard and Boothe (2009), "Factors key to resilience are positive relationships, meaningful learning activities, and high expectations" (p. 14).

Teachers like Travis create an environment in which all students can feel accepted and welcome. This is especially important when homeless children often have such limited time at any one school. Often teachers return to school after a weekend and one of their homeless students will just be gone. No goodbyes, no picking up their belongings. Teachers and social workers now urge Family Shelter to help make goodbyes, when families move on, part of the experience.

Think of a child just gone with no goodbye, can't take home their things from their lockers and artwork from the classroom. We ask Family Shelter, if they know, to let us know that a child will be leaving so that classmates can say goodbye and the child can have closure,

Natalie shares. While uncertainty, sadness, and fear may still be a part of the student's experiences, teachers and social workers at Red River Elementary hope the children can also experience the feelings that they matter to the school and classroom, that they were cared for, and that they will be missed.

As teacher-researchers, we gained experience that provides new knowledge and expands our human empathy. Our research left us with a plethora of ongoing questions. Though better

prepared to assist our Ed. 212 foundations students, we now wanted the local issue of education for the homeless to impact all teacher education majors at Plainsville College.

Relating to Teacher Education

A unique circumstance arose that allowed all education students at the college to critically engage. The Department of Education at Plainsville College designed a Vocation Retreat for education majors. The purpose of the retreat was to ask students to reflect upon their call to serve as teachers in a world where poverty, hunger, and homelessness are ever present.

The Vocation Retreat provided an opportunity for students to interact with individuals who are intensely involved with the homeless and hungry on a daily basis. Many individuals with a variety of roles at the college or in the community participated. Including the community development administrator, representatives from the food pantry, and a representative from the shelter. All participants in our research interviews generously agreed to a panel discussion. The campus pastor and faculty from various departments came to assist students in considering the issues surrounding homelessness through a variety of academic lenses.

The campus pastor opened the Retreat by asking students to list the characteristics making them a strong and vital person. The lists were shared amongst table groups providing the insight that all have the characteristics necessary to help and serve, although each individual's may take a unique shape and form. The pastor talked about calling—a spiritual, though not religious, sense of purposefulness in serving others through career. She reminded students that the qualities making them vital persons would contribute to their practice of teaching as a calling.

In addressing our students' assumptions, one presenter asked them to reflect on themselves at the age of the students they intend to teach, constructing a mental image of clothing, hairstyle, school participation, life outside of school, and family life. Partners shared their thoughts. Next, students formed mental images of the students they expect to teach. Again they discussed the pictures that came to mind. Lastly, students were asked to form a mental picture of homeless students. The question the presenter asked was: Did the students you expect to teach look a lot like you in your mind's eye? Chuckling could be heard as the majority of our students admitted that their image of the students they expect to teach was close to their images of themselves as children. The realization of their assumptions about what students would look or be like was a surprise to them. It was clear that many did not yet have a concept of how different from themselves their future students would be.

Over the course of the morning, numerous stories surrounding hunger and homelessness were shared with our students, further legitimizing the issues and providing perspectives from people in daily contact with diversity locally. Students heard the same rich and revealing stories we heard in our interviews. They critically engaged in the complexities of the often overwhelming issue of education for homeless children. We saw students' comprehension of how far reaching these issues are among our community's children develop through reflective discussions and the questions they raised for guest speakers.

The Vocation Retreat closed with discussion of what students learned, through the retreat, in teacher education courses, and through their personal experiences, that will serve in meeting the needs of homeless children and adolescents. In addition, our students discussed what they may need to reexamined in their beliefs, values, and intended practices in order to serve future students. The question remains in what ways do we need to further reeducate ourselves, based on assumptions held, and how will we proceed so as to continue to grow? Students left the retreat recognizing

that there is no single, fixed solution to the multiple issues surrounding education of the homeless. What is necessary is investment. Investment of time, energy, compassion, and creative problem solving. The investment of *more, more than any teacher is required to do as a public educator.*

The Vocation Retreat brought together professionals involved with the schools, the shelter, and food pantries and provided teacher education students insights into experiences, solutions, and further needs. These first steps on our part, as professors and as a department, will require further exploration and development. We recognize a gap that exists in our curriculum and we are working to address what our students need to become effective educators for all students regardless of circumstance.

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