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### Supporting Children who are Homeless in the Classroom

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Running Heading: SUPPORTING CHILDREN WHO ARE HOMELESS

Supporting Children who are Homeless in the Classroom

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**Table of Contents**

Abstract.....	3
Introduction .....	4
Childhood Homelessness in the United States .....	5
Effects of Homelessness on the Child .....	5
Current Policies in Place to Support Children who are Homeless .....	7
The School Context .....	8
A Case Study of the Boston City Schools .....	11
Methods .....	11
Participants .....	11
Procedures .....	12
Results .....	14
Discussion.....	16
Limitations.....	17
Conclusion.....	17
References .....	18

**Abstract**

This report addresses the need for classroom teachers to provide additional educational supports to young children who are homeless as they are at risk to face academic and social challenges due to their circumstances at home. This paper defines homelessness, discusses the negative effects of homelessness on the child, notes any present policies in place that address homeless children, highlights the burdens that classroom teachers face, and offers suggestions for these classroom teachers so that they can better educate children who are homeless. Furthermore, a case study of the topic of homelessness in Boston Public Schools has been examined to illustrate how this issue is present in today's society. Educators from Boston Public Schools discuss their experiences and thoughts on the topic of supporting children who are homeless in their classroom. From their responses, common themes surrounding this topic emerged. This article concludes with addressing the need for school systems to make improvements in the current supports that they have for their students who are homeless. In summary, the findings of this paper suggest that students who are homeless need more access to emotional supports that serve as a foundation for academic supports.

### **Introduction**

According to the United States Census Bureau (2013), more than forty-five million Americans currently live at or below the poverty line, resulting in a significant presence of homelessness throughout the country. More alarmingly, of these individuals who are living in poverty, the majority are children, as one in thirty children in the United States are homeless. Although homelessness rates affect many aspects of society, such as the health of the environment and the quality of neighborhoods, they greatly impact schools, as educators endure the challenge of teaching children who are homeless. Although these children, like most children, want to learn, they are at risk to face both academic and social challenges that may leave them at a disadvantage in the classroom.

Despite the negative connotations that homelessness has on a child's academic and social life, classroom teachers have the unique opportunity to drastically help that child as "the child's classroom may be the only place where the child can experience quiet, interact with children his/her age, and experience success...School is the most normal activity that most children experience collectively...For homeless children it is much more than a learning environment. It is a place of safety, personal space, friendships, and support" (Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000). Although the rates of homelessness in the United States are substantial, if educators and administrators can come together to better support children who are homeless throughout their schooling, then these children will be better positioned to overcome the negative implications of their challenging home circumstances. This paper addresses the effects of homelessness on the child, questions the current supports that are in place to help these types of students, and presents suggestions on how to better educate children who are homeless.

### **Childhood Homelessness in the United States**

Depending on the source, the definition of the term homelessness may vary; however, for the purpose of this research, the 1987 McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act's definition will be referred, as it is inclusive of a variety of different types of home lives. According to Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, homeless youth and children are defined as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." By using this definition, children from various home lives may be considered as homeless. It is important for educators to consider this broader definition, as children from these varying home circumstances are all at risk to face negative effects of homelessness.

### **Effects of Homelessness on the Child**

Extensive research has found that children who grow up homeless are at-risk to endure toxic stress, which can lead to negative implications for a child's physical, social, and academic development. In a report from 2004, researcher Kevin James Swick notes that a child's life is negatively influenced by homelessness because he or she is at risk to experience isolation from needed support people, loss of self-esteem, loss of privacy, lack of control over daily routines, loss of social and economic resources, disruption of communications systems, high stress because of being homeless, and constant mobility. The build-up of these risk factors can lead to major stress on the child. Although experiencing stress is healthy and normal for a human, enduring toxic stress, or "strong, frequent or prolonged activation of the body's stress management system, can hinder brain development, thus leading to health complications" (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, p. 2, 2014/2015). When the brain activates its' stress management system, two hormones, adrenaline and cortisol, are produced and released in high quantity throughout the body. Adrenaline "mobilizes energy stores and

alters blood flow, thereby allowing the body to effectively deal with a range of stresses”, while cortisol “enhances certain types of memory and activates immune responses” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, p. 3, 2014). During certain situations, these elevated hormone levels are essential to survival and benefit the human who is encountering stress; however, when a person experiences toxic stress, these levels are raised for a prolonged amount of time, which is detrimental. Specifically, sustaining one’s activation of these hormones can lead to impairments in learning, memory, and the ability to regulate oneself; therefore, because a child who is homeless is at risk to face toxic stress, he or she is also at risk to face academic and social challenges in the classroom.

With regards to academics, children who are homeless may have diminished cognitive ability due to the effects of toxic stress on the brain as well as less cognitively enriching environments. At a young age, children who are homeless present with developmental delays, particularly in their language and literacy skills (Roseberry-McKibbin, 2012). These delays have been attributed to a lack of exposure to literacy materials, such as books, at home, as well as the negative effects of toxic stress on the brain. Although developmental delays may be overcome, they are significant because they hinder a child’s ability to progress in learning. For instance, elementary school aged children who are homeless do not perform as well on standardized testing as children who are not homeless. Specifically, according to the National Center for Homeless Education (2016), students who are homeless perform with only 25% reading proficiency compared to other students who perform with 36% proficiency. Furthermore, students who are homeless on average perform lower on mathematics examinations as well. In addition to low-test scores, children who are homeless are twice as likely to have a learning disability than those children from a middle-income household. Lastly, about half of the

population of students who are homeless repeat a grade, which heightens the likelihood of continued achievement delays. Due to the stress that children who are homeless face every day, their brains may not be as well developed to meet the demands of the classroom as other students' brains are.

Similar to how homelessness may affect a child's academic performance, it also may hinder his or her social skills. In some cases, toxic stress can cause the brain structure to alter, resulting in the areas of the brain responsible for fear and impulsivity to grow (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2014/2015). This enlargement of the brain perhaps is why children who are homeless are more likely to have social-emotional issues. Children who endure toxic stress are more likely to experience feelings of anxiety and aggression, likely because their bodies are used to being overly alert, so they may see another person or situation as hostile when it actually is not. This anxiety and aggression may cause issues with forming relationships, trusting others, and handling emotions (Buckner, Bassuk, Weinreb, & Brooks, 1999). These challenges can result in social and behavioral outbursts for the child in the classroom. When a child is not emotionally stable, it is difficult to focus on learning; therefore, the effects of homelessness on a student's social-emotional development could be significant.

### **Current Policies in Place to Support Children who are Homeless**

Currently in the United States, there are certain policies in place that attempt to support children who are homeless. Specifically, the McKinney Vento Act (1987) states that children who are homeless will have the same access to public schools as other students. The act ensures these students the right to immediate enrollment, the right to choose what school to attend, the right to transportation, and the right to participate in the same programs and activities as other students. Through this act, children who are homeless receive the opportunity to experience a

free, public education; however, there need to be additional supports to care for these students once they arrive at school. In efforts to aid these students once they are in the classroom, under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965), the United States Department of Education has created Title One, which is a program that strives to improve the academic achievement of students who are at a socioeconomic disadvantage. Under Title One, federal funds are distributed to schools depending on their census poverty estimates as well as on the cost of education in each state (US Department of Education, 2015). Title One funds are used to provide additional academic and learning supports to help low-achieving and at-risk children with an emphasis on literacy and mathematic skills. Despite annually spending hundreds of dollars per disadvantaged student, the Title One services are not efficiently benefiting these students (Dynarski & Kaniz, 2015). This evidence suggests that educational leaders need to reevaluate how funds are being used to support children who are homeless.

### **The School Context**

When considering effects of homelessness there are several influences, such as teachers, classroom settings, and school policies, which play a role in these children's educational lives. Although there are several factors affecting each child's educational experience, the classroom teacher spends the most significant time with the students, thus he or she must be properly prepared to aid those who are homeless. If classroom teachers are better versed to educate students who are homeless, then these students will perform better in school.

Before addressing how classroom teachers can effectively support children who are homeless, it is important to speak to the burdens that these teachers will face. One of the most challenging aspects of educating students who are homeless is identifying them, as some families may not want to share with school employees that they are experiencing homelessness (Driver &

Spady, 2013). A family may be inhibited “due to discomfort with their current living situation, fear that their children will be moved to another school or stigmatized by thoughtless remarks, or [they] may not attempt to enroll their children, assuming they would not have the necessary documents” (Driver & Spady, p. 1, 2013). Unfortunately, these factors may cause families to keep their home lives private, which would make it more difficult for classroom teachers to fully support these children.

In addition to the challenge of identifying students who are homeless, classroom teachers are also faced with the task of trying to keep these students on pace with the class despite their risk to face chronic absenteeism (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017). Chronic absenteeism refers to missing 10% or more of the school year and can be caused by a variety of reasons (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017). One of the leading causes of chronic absenteeism is housing instability, thus students who are homeless are at a higher risk to encounter this issue. Specifically, according to the National Center for Homeless Education, students who are homeless are at an 80% higher likelihood to experience chronic absenteeism, particularly during the elementary school years. Considering that academic performance is closely linked with attendance, chronic absenteeism is harmful to a student’s success in school. Classroom teachers of students who are homeless are burdened with trying to help these students make up for the class time they have missed while continuing to teach the rest of the students.

Although there are obvious challenges that are associated with teaching students who are homeless, if classroom teachers find strategies to support these children’s emotional needs, then they will ultimately help their overall school performance. In order to help these children’s emotional needs, classroom teachers must consider how to improve their own perceptions and the classroom environment’s culture. Teachers must consider and be aware of their own personal

biases regarding to ensure that they are not stigmatizing these students (Moore, 2013). By adjusting their own thoughts towards homeless, classroom teachers will be more understanding of the emotional needs that these students may have. Furthermore, the classroom teacher has the power to ensure that his or her classroom is well designed to support children's learning, which is particularly important for students who are homeless as they "lack structure and need to feel the security of an organized, predictable classroom and school schedule, so providing a well-established, daily routine gives a sense of stability and helps children feel that the classroom is a calm, peaceful place to learn" (Moore, 2013, p. 6). By simply providing students who are homeless with a positive classroom environment, classroom teachers are helping to give them stability, which is crucial to social-emotional development. Ultimately, classroom teachers should first seek out strategies, such as adjusting biases and creating a welcoming classroom, to enhance their students' comfortableness. If students are more comfortable at school, then they will be more emotionally stable, which will increase their ability to learn. With students who are homeless, it is particularly important that their emotional needs are met at school, considering these needs are not necessarily met outside of school.

Classroom teachers can foster the social-emotional development of their students; however, schools need more psychological professionals for children who are homeless, as they are likely to present with larger scale emotional needs that classroom teachers are not equipped to handle alone. If schools had more programs with trained employees to help with students' emotional challenges, then these students would likely be better prepared to learn. Overall, educators must look for ways to support the social-emotional implications of homelessness before the academic implications, as students are better positioned to perform well in school if they are emotional stable.

### **A Case Study of the Boston City Schools**

Despite being the largest city in one of the most educationally successful states within the United States, Boston's schools are struggling with facing the challenge of a large population of students who are homeless. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2016), 21,112 students were recognized homeless in the 2016-2017 academic school year; however, some experts suggest there could be up to 37,000 students as some are more difficult to identify. With this high number of children facing homelessness in the area, Boston educators are burdened with the task of finding ways to support these children as well as their other students. Although the high rate of homelessness for students of Boston Public Schools is startling, there is hope: in 2018, Boston Mayor Martin J. Walsh and Superintendent Thomas Chang have committed \$1 million of their school budget to supporting children who are homeless (Boston Public Schools, 2017). Hopefully, this money will be effectively used to better support the large number of Boston students who are experiencing homelessness.

### **Methods**

#### **Participants**

Through communication with the Associate Superintendent of Boston Public Schools, employees of the Patrick Kennedy Elementary School in East Boston were selected to participate in interviews to help illuminate the experiences of a teachers and a principal as they seek to ensure that children who are homeless are being supported by the school system. This particular elementary school was selected because its' population is faced with economic challenges, as 47.7% of their students identify as economically disadvantaged compared to Massachusetts's state average of 27.4% (Boston Public Schools, 2018).

## Procedures

All procedures and interview questions were approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB #6836). In an attempt to gain personalized insight on the issue of supporting children who are homeless in the classroom, employees of the Boston Public Schools were briefly interviewed. These interviews consist of five short questions that ask each employee to discuss his or her own experiences with this matter as well as his or her own beliefs on how to better improve these children's educational experiences. The interview questions were designed in such a way to have each interviewed respondent first speak of the challenges of educating those children who are homeless and then speak of supports they would like to have in their classroom. The questions were designed this way to highlight the potential burdens for these educators based on the extant research.

The interview questions vary depending on the employee's role. Specifically, there are questions for those in an administrative role, and there are questions for those in a classroom teacher role. The questions for the administrator include the following:

- 1. Considering that "homeless" is a broad term that could refer to many types of individuals, are there students within your school that are homeless? If so, do you personally provide any additional supports to students who are homeless?*
- 2. What challenges do you and your employees face when supporting students who are homeless?*
- 3. Do you collaborate with classroom teachers who have students who are homeless? If so, what do you do with these classroom teachers?*
- 4. What do you think are the most effective supports/resources?*

5. *What supports/resources would you like your school to have that it doesn't already have?*

*Please explain why you would like these specific supports/resources.*

The questions for the classroom teacher include the following:

1. *Considering that "homeless" is a broad term that could refer to many types of individuals, do you have any experience working with a student who is homeless?*
2. *What challenges do you, or your co-workers, face when educating students who are homeless?*
3. *Part of my research paper explores the idea that students who are homeless may be difficult to identify. Have you encountered this issue within your own experiences?*
4. *Are there any specific supports you provide students who are homeless within your classroom? Please note any supports that you know of at the district and administrative as well. Also, please note how these supports' effectiveness is evaluated.*
5. *Are there any supports/resources that you wish you had access to better support your students who are homeless?*

On March 2, 2018, the interviews were conducted. At the beginning of each interview, interviewee asked each interviewed respondent to provide his or her name, gender, position, and years of experience teaching. The first interviewee was the school principal, who is a female currently in her second year as the administrative role of the principal. The second interviewee was a school teacher, who is also a female currently in her eighth year as a classroom teacher. During the interviews, the interviewer took notes and recorded the responses on an audio device to ensure that all of the conversation was properly accounted for. Later on, the interviewer listened to all of the audio recordings to become familiar with the data. Then, notes on these

recordings were taken and broken down for each interviewed respondent's answers to each question. From these notes, data was organized by similar themes.

### **Results**

Through transcribing the respondents' answers, common themes emerged that were consistent with prior research. In particular, their responses highlighted the following themes:

1. Students who are homeless do not have access to the same resources as other students, resulting in less extra-curricular activities for them.
2. Students who are homeless present with social-emotional challenges in the classroom.

Some direct quotes that illustrate these themes include:

1. "Across the whole school, what we notice with our kids is an opportunity gap. There is no opportunity for these kids to play baseball." –Principal
2. "There is definitely a greater level of anxiety with our students who are homeless which makes it difficult for them to focus." –Classroom Teacher
3. "It is hard to do school when you aren't stable at home." –Classroom Teacher

From these responses it is evident that these students struggle with emotional challenges due to their homelessness, which is consistent with prior research. Both employees spoke to how they would prefer more funds to be put towards providing their students with counseling, as they do not feel as though they are able to meet the emotional needs of their students.

Although these employees spoke of how challenging it is for them to educate students who are homeless, they also offered insight to what their school is doing to help these students. This particular school has launched a program called HOUSE, which provides all of their students to attend a non-academic class each day, such as yoga, soccer, music, or art, in an attempt to give students more opportunities to engage in activities that they otherwise may not

experience. The principal noted that HOUSE is beneficial to students in two unique ways. Firstly, it provides all students with choice, as they are allowed to choose what activity they would like to go to. Furthermore, it provides students who are homeless with access to opportunities that they do not experience outside of school. Perhaps creating programs such as this one is another way that schools can support children who are homeless. In addition to HOUSE, this school's basement serves as a food shelter. Employees, community members, and families of the school bring in canned goods and other non-perishable items. Each Friday, students and parents are able to go down to the basement and fill a bag to bring home for the weekend. Both HOUSE and the food shelter in the basement are strategies that this school has created to try to compensate for some of their students' lack of access to resources.

Although this school has created programs to provide more resources to their students, the respondents noted that they have not found efficient strategies to support their student's social-emotional challenges. The principal, did note that she often meets with students who are struggling with emotional issues, suggesting there is collaboration between this school's administration and classroom teachers. However, she would prefer to see more funding to be put towards hiring trained counselors, who could be consistently available to those students struggling with social-emotional challenges.

Overall, the two themes of students who are homeless do not have the same resources as other students and often present with more emotional issues emerged. Although these employees offered some strategies to help these students, it is clear that there needs to be more outlets for them. By interviewing these current employees, the theory of putting more emphasis on finding strategies to support students' social-emotional development was supported.

### **Discussion**

This project highlights how students who are homeless are at risk to face challenges at school due to the stress they endure outside of the classroom. Although the academic achievement gaps of children who are homeless are of obvious concern, the work here indicated a need to also focus on supporting these children's social-emotional development. As identified by the interviews conducted, children who are homeless are struggling to efficiently learn because they are experiencing unstable emotions and feelings.

Although programs like Title One offer schools funding for educating these children, there needs to be more resources to provide supports that foster emotional challenges. As noted by current Boston Public School educators, these students would benefit from consistent counseling at school, as well as opportunities to engage in extra curricular activities that they otherwise do not experience outside of school. These types of supports require resources that classroom teachers cannot provide on their own. However, there are strategies that classroom teachers can use on their own. For instance, teachers can support students by creating a daily routine and checking in with the child's well-being before beginning the academic school day. Additionally, teachers, due to their consistent time in the classroom, have the unique ability to build strong relationships with children, which will provide them with someone to trust. Furthermore, classroom teachers should look for opportunities to promote resiliency in their students, which can simply be done through promoting a growth mindset, or the idea that one can improve with enough effort. If classroom teachers use positive language, their students will likely be more confident that they can get through the given task (Dweck, 2008). Ultimately, even though supporting children who are homeless is a seemingly daunting task for classroom teachers, it is feasible.

**Limitations**

It is important to note that even though the current project was expansive of many types of resources for children that were homeless, the interviews and qualitative themes that emerged were from just one school; therefore, they are limited. Nevertheless, the themes that emerged from these voices help highlight how our extant understanding of the impact of homelessness and toxic stress are experienced by educators. It is important to draw attention to the voices of those that are in the field working to educate and support children experiencing homelessness. Their thoughts can help contribute to a comprehensive understanding of we can ensure resiliency, academic success, and social-emotional well-being.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, students who are homeless tend to be at an academic and social disadvantage when they go to school due to the experiences they endure outside of school. However, if educators are properly trained and equipped with the adequate resources, they can assist these students to overcome their challenges. Like most issues, this one requires funding, thus our leaders must consider how to reallocate the budget so that students who are homeless receive equal access to education.

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