

CHALLENGES FACING SERVICE PROVIDERS IN  
EDUCATING HOMELESS STUDENTS

By

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EDUCATING HOMELESS STUDENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Background .....	2
Overview of the Problem .....	4
Purpose of the Study .....	5
Methodology .....	6
Definition of Homelessness .....	6
Brief History of Family Homelessness .....	8
Delimitations .....	10
Summary .....	10
II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	11
The Causes of Homelessness .....	12
The Results of Homelessness on Families' Lives.....	14
Services Available to the Homeless.....	15
Barriers to Homeless Services .....	18
McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act.....	20
Educational Ramifications for Homeless Students.....	22
III. METHODOLOGY .....	24
Research Perspective .....	25
Research Context .....	27
Research Participants .....	29
Data Collection .....	31
Permission and Ethical Issues.....	32
Data Analysis.....	33
Conclusion.....	34

Chapter	Page
IV. FINDINGS.....	35
Participants' Backgrounds .....	36
Expected Categories .....	40
The Category of Barriers for the Homeless .....	41
The Category of Common Characteristics in the Homeless .....	42
The Category of the Role of the Educational System .....	43
Emerging Themes .....	46
The Theme of the Persistence of Poverty and Homelessness .....	47
The Theme of Perceptions of the Homeless .....	50
The Theme of the Trauma-Informed Approach.....	51
The Theme of Lack of Time .....	53
V. CONCLUSION.....	55
Research Problem .....	55
Understanding the Research Questions .....	56
Review of Methodology .....	57
Variations on Categories.....	58
Barriers.....	58
Characteristics.....	58
Educational System.....	59
Variations on Themes .....	60
Persistence of Poverty and Homelessness .....	60
Perceptions of the Homeless .....	61
Trauma-Informed Approach .....	62
Lack of Time .....	63
Implications.....	64
Recommendations for Future Research .....	66
Final Thoughts .....	68
REFERENCES .....	69
APPENDICES .....	73

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

For those who provide services to homeless families with school-aged children, the challenges of educating homeless students and ensuring that their needs are met are sometimes overwhelming. I became interested in the education of homeless students and those who provide services to them through my master's level classes at Oklahoma State University and through my friendship with the executive director of a transitional women's shelter in Kansas City, Missouri. Through being challenged to find advocacy issues and reading about marginalized sections of school society, I discovered that homeless students often have no advocates, no voice, and sometimes no hope of rising above their situation and succeeding in traditional ways at school. I also found that these students are often invisible, and in my own classroom experience, their living situations are often unknown to those who teach them. I have also discovered through my research that I, too, was homeless as a school-aged child. My family often lived with our extended family, and according to the definition of homelessness found in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2008), this "doubling up" constitutes homelessness. My mother and siblings also endured domestic violence that sprang from substance abuse which caused us to sometimes have to flee our home at a moment's notice, leaving our personal possessions behind. These precious items

would not always be waiting for us the next time we went home. These losses have had a profound effect on us. Families who are chronically homeless must have it much worse than we did, but the pain and suffering that we have felt from the loss of our sense of safety and our meager possessions lingers in our hearts and minds to this day.

Homeless students and their families do, however, have people who look out for their best interests. These people who work on national, state, and local levels strive to garner all the resources available to make a difference in the quality of care homeless families receive and the quality of educational opportunities for homeless students.

### **Background**

The recent economic crisis has brought new attention to the plight of the homeless student, although homeless students have been in our midst as long as the education system has been in place (Leginski, 2007; Stronge, 1992). In an informal questioning of my peers in the education field, I have found that these students are often educated by teachers who know very little about their situations and the provisions mandated by federal law to accommodate them. Finding a way to make sure that homeless children receive the best possible education is of great importance if the cycle of poverty and homelessness is to be abated (Books, 2007; Johnson & Cnaan, 1995; Knowlton, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Polakow, 2007; Quint, 1994). Since classroom teachers are called on to fill so many roles in today's educational system, this task is difficult. Teachers, of course, teach subject matter such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, but they also teach cooperation, fairness, and tolerance. Teachers often must act as substitute parent, mentor, and champion in the midst of fulfilling curriculum requirements, evaluating student work, and completing massive reports such as grade cards and eligibility lists. All these varied responsibilities

leave teachers little time to make the invaluable connections with students that they must make to be effective. This is the reason support from service providers for the homeless is crucial. These service providers seek to ensure that students get the help they need.

Teachers' responsibilities leave little time for them to learn and implement all the federal mandates for educating children in their classrooms, or even to identify a student who may be homeless. Most teachers do not visit their students at home and the home life of students oftentimes greatly affects their school performance. Even assuming that students have a home life is sometimes a stretch. A recent report from The National Center on Family Homelessness (2009) states that more than 1.5 million of our nation's children go to sleep without a home each year which translates into one in every 50 American children experiencing homelessness (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Most teachers I have spoken to have no idea that the problem of child homelessness is so prevalent.

Thankfully, other professionals who work with the homeless student population, either directly or indirectly, provide guidelines and support for educators to enable them to become aware of not only how to identify homeless students but also how best to ensure homeless students receive the educational and social services they require. These homeless service providers who include policy makers, researchers, trainers, clinical directors, child psychologists, and executive directors of homeless facilities all adhere to the mandates in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2008). The reasons for the emerging prevalence of homelessness among American students, the resulting deficits experienced by these children, as well as federal mandates addressing homeless education and the steps that those who support education professionals may take in weaving a web of care for these

students are all areas of study that could potentially improve these children's outlook on life and maybe even their futures.

### **Overview of the Problem**

There are laws that protect homeless students in this country. Service providers as well as teachers are mandated to adhere to these laws as they identify the characteristics of homeless children in order to address the challenges associated in educating them. These children often feel and are powerless. Though it is not their fault, they are traumatized, which may result in their being emotionally and socially withdrawn. The fallout from this trauma often means homeless children experience multiple problems in school. Homeless children generally have high rates of absenteeism, high drop-out rates, and change schools several times throughout a single school year and many times during their school careers (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). These children may also exhibit low literacy rates and perform poorly on mandated tests (Polakow, 2007). All these factors result in an inconsistent and ineffective education. A child's living situation may lead to a marginalized status in school and society. A homeless child's education may also be affected by how knowledgeable teachers are about their responsibilities to homeless children (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Teachers and other service providers have an obligation to know how to pick up the signals that a child is homeless, even though students rarely wear signs announcing their address, or lack thereof. Teachers and other educational professionals receive support from homeless service providers to learn their homeless students' rights and the laws that protect them. Parents make up the other part of this team to adhere to these mandates.

The problem lies in how those who provide services to homeless families and their school-aged children support those students and their families as well as how they best support the teachers who are in charge of educating those students. All those involved in the care and education of homeless students need to be informed regarding the mandates pertaining to the education of homeless students, and those mandates need to be followed. Based on this problem, I have developed the following research question and sub questions:

Research question:

- How do service providers support homeless students and their families?

Sub questions:

- What challenges do service providers encounter in their work with the homeless?
- What are the perceptions of service providers regarding what teachers need to know about meeting the needs of their homeless students?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain understanding of how service providers can best address homeless students' educational needs in terms of support from and to various entities. This study will also explore the challenges this population of students has with school attendance, consistency in terms of staying in the same school system, graduation rates, and other education-related challenges as well as the challenges of helping these students break the cycle of poverty and homelessness. This qualitative, narrative research study is worthwhile in that with the recent downturn in the economy, more students are homeless, more families, educators, and communities are dealing with this problem on a greater scale than they are accustomed to, and homeless students historically have low

literacy rates and high dropout rates (Institute for Children, 2001). This study seeks an understanding of what challenges service providers encounter in their quest to enable more homeless students to improve their literacy rates, stay in school, and graduate.

### **Methodology**

This research study is a qualitative, narrative one that follows van Manen's guide for theme analysis (van Manen, 1990). The frame of qualitative, phenomenological research is used for this study since the methods and techniques involve interviewing service providers concerning their lived experience (van Manen, 1990). Qualitative interviews through which the researcher learns from participants through "long, focused conversations" were employed in this study (deMarrais, 2004, p. 52). The methodology used is explained more fully in Chapter III.

### **Definition of Homelessness**

Finding a definition of homelessness that encompasses the problem and expresses the complexity of this situation is difficult. A person can be considered homeless even if he or she has a temporary roof over his or her head. If a person is only housed at the whim of another person or agency, that person is still technically homeless (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). James H. Stronge (1992) gives the universally identifiable descriptor of homelessness as being the absence of a permanent place called home, but then he goes on to quote a more inclusive yet specific way of defining homelessness by the National Coalition for the Homeless:

[B]eing homeless means more than not having a secure place to sleep. Being homeless means having no place to store the things that connect you to your past; it means losing contact with friends and family; it means uprooting your child from

school; it means having to endure the shame of what is still perceived as personal failure. (pp. 3-4)

The definition of homelessness used in the National Center on Family Homelessness publication *America's Youngest Outcasts: State Report Card on Child Homelessness* (2009) is contained in the subtitle of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Title X, Part C, of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and adopted by the U.S. Department of Education.

The definition includes children and youth who are:

- Sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason (sometimes referred to as *doubling-up*);
- Living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to lack of alternative accommodations;
- Living in emergency or transitional shelters;
- Abandoned in hospitals;
- Awaiting foster care placement;
- Using a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings;
- Living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- Migratory children who qualify as homeless because they are living in circumstances described above. (p. 5)

The preceding definitions are the ones used in this study as they encompass the extent of homelessness as well as the spirit of homelessness. Losing connections with friends and family as well as with one's possessions elicits a helpless feeling in my experience. Losing

connections with one's home school also has an effect on the homeless students who experience this loss.

However, the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) definition of homelessness differs. The HUD definition does not include "doubling up" (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Community Planning and Development, 2007). In order to demonstrate that they are serving the chronically homeless, HUD defines chronic homelessness as only those who are unaccompanied homeless individuals with a disabling condition who have either been continuously homeless for a year or more or have had at least four episodes of homelessness in the past three years. To be considered chronically homeless a person must have been on the streets or in an emergency shelter (i.e., not transitional housing) during these stays (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Office of Community Planning and Development, 2007). This difference in definition may be due to political ramifications concerning numbers for economic reasons.

### **Brief History of Family Homelessness in the U. S.**

Homelessness in America has been around since Colonial America according to James H. Stronge (1992) as well as Walter Leginski (2007). This is not a new phenomenon. Economic downturns seem to be the cause for periodic surges in homeless numbers (Quint, 1994; Stronge, 1992). From the early 1900's through the 1970's, single men dominated the homeless population often living in places termed "skid rows" (Stronge, 1992, p. 5). However, from the early 1980's recession years to the present, our country has seen a rapid rise in the number of family homelessness (Leginski, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Quint, 1994; Stronge, 1992). American citizens began in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to expect more from the federal government in terms of assistance to ease economic

rough patches (Leginski, 2007). Although negative attitudes toward the homeless abound in the U. S., our country has responded to their needs.

According to Leginski (2007):

The primary locus for organizing a response to homelessness remains at the municipal and county level. Historians trace this tradition to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, when colonies adopted features of English law. Locally organized charity to homeless people engaged both civic and private sector partners for more than 200 years...it is not until the 1930's that anyone speaks overtly to the complexity of multiple partners operating and the desirability of greater coordination. By the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, coordination again emerged as an even stronger theme. One of the legacies we may leave from addressing the contemporary wave of homelessness might be our progress and methodology for achieving coordination among the multiple service providers.

(p. 5)

The 1987 McKinney Homeless Assistance Act (now McKinney-Vento) remains the only enduring response by the government to the increasing numbers of homeless (Leginski, 2007).

The actual number of homeless people in this country is difficult to assess and greatly depends upon which definition of homelessness one uses. One fact that is not debated, though, is that homelessness, especially among single, female-headed households, is climbing at an alarming rate (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Stronge, 1992); consequently, the numbers of homeless students is also climbing (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009).

## **Delimitations**

The delimitations of this study include the following:

1. The study was limited to those who provide services in major metropolitan or urban areas of the United States.
2. This population limitation may result in a lack of generalizability of the results of the study.
3. Only five service providers were interviewed.

## **Summary**

The study is organized in five chapters. Chapter I, the introductory chapter, includes background information, the overview of the study's problem, the purpose of this study, a detailed definition of homelessness, a brief history of family homelessness, as well as some delimitations of the study. Chapter II contains the review of the literature conducted for the study. A description of the research methodology as well as information on the research participants and the procedures used for collecting and analyzing data are included in Chapter III. Chapter IV details the findings of the research study. Chapter V contains the conclusion, reflections, and implications of this research study.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The review of the literature related to homelessness includes information on not only the challenges facing those who provide services to the homeless but also about the hardships endured by the homeless themselves including homeless students and their educational challenges. The literature speaks also to the reasons people become homeless, how homelessness feels for the affected, and why homelessness and its underlying causes tend to be cyclical. Those who are homeless feel a sense of loss not only of material things but also of power and pride. This sense of loss is felt not only by the parent, or caregiver, but also by the child. Being homeless is so much more than not having a roof overhead; being homeless strikes at the very soul of a person by making them feel a sense of loss and failure and fear (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). However, some believe that ending homelessness is possible if all those involved in providing services to homeless people work together and that neglecting to work together could have dire, long-lasting consequences. So dire, in fact, that The National Center on Family Homelessness asserts that “it is virtually impossible to reclaim the life of a child who has spent his childhood without a home” (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009, p. ii).

## **The Causes of Homelessness**

Homelessness has many causes and not just one cause as some might suspect. Of course, poverty plays a large role in determining family homelessness (Johnson & Cnaan, 1995; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Knowlton, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Polakow, 2007; Quint, 1994; Stronge, 1992; Vissing, 1999). The causes of this poverty are also multitudinous. The economic recession that the United States has been experiencing recently as well as the recession of the 1930's and the 1980's has enabled a basis for poverty (Leginski, 2007; Quint, 1994; Stronge, 1992). The cyclical nature of poverty is also a factor in keeping many families in poverty and without a home (Books, 2007; Johnson & Cnaan, 1995; Knowlton, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Polakow, 2007; Quint, 1994). Lack of money certainly is a large factor in rendering a family homeless. But poverty is not just about insufficient funds; poverty is also a lifestyle. Those who live in chronic poverty and homelessness often have other underlying factors that contribute to their situations.

One of these factors is a lack of education and poor academic achievement (Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Kennedy, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Swick, 2007). Those who have low academic success tend to earn less in their lifetimes than people who graduate from high school and pursue higher degrees; this level of education is something that people in poverty and in homeless situations lack (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). In fact, The National Center on Family Homelessness in their 2009 report card on child homelessness reports that the long-term economic consequences of not graduating from high school are a \$41 billion loss in lifetime earnings and a \$26 billion loss in contributions to society. This loss of

earnings results in a lack of food security and health care as well as a lack of housing (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009).

Another part of the lifestyle of poverty and homelessness is violence. Violence, domestic violence in particular, tends to keep people in poverty and homelessness through frequent moves, fear of someone discovering the aftermath of the violence, and through shame (Anderson, Stuttaford, & Vostanis, 2006; Johnson & Cnaan, 1995; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Quint, 1994; Roschelle, 2008; Stronge, 1992). As a matter of fact, Stronge (1992) quotes Bassuk and Rosenburg in their study on domestic violence and homeless women with children as saying “about 41% of the homeless mothers...detailed a relationship in which they had been battered” (p. 18). This violence has a profound effect on the children who witness it. And, not every mother who is forced to flee her home with her children to escape this violence has a relative or friend to turn to who is willing to take them in (Johnson, 1995; Newman, 1999; Stronge, 1995; Swick, 2008; Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008). Further, K. J. Swick (2008) says that “violence is one of the most prevalent elements in the lives of homeless families with young children ... studies indicate that between 30% and 70% of homeless families have violence as either a cause of their homelessness or a key factor in their lives” (p. 81). The National Center on Family Homelessness also reports that at least 25% of homeless children have witnessed violence, 22% have been separated from their families, approximately 50% have problems with anxiety and depression, and that 20% of homeless preschoolers have emotional problems that require professional care (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). So, it seems, with the rising incidence of violence in our society, the incidence of family homelessness and its causes also rise.

Another contributing factor to the lifestyle of poverty and homelessness is substance abuse (Knowlton, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Roschelle, 2008; Stronge, 1995). Eighty-five percent of homeless mothers are likely to be dependent on drugs and alcohol and over one-third have a chronic medical problem (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Obvious problems with employment and housing and child custody result from substance abuse and chronic illness.

Natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina also contribute to the causes of family homelessness (Hall, 2007; Knowlton, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Roughly 370,000 school children were displaced by this hurricane (Hall, 2007). Those who seek to discriminate against homeless people and their children would be well advised to understand that homelessness is not a choice. The causes of homelessness are various and some apply to all homeless families while others only apply in special circumstances as seen with the hurricane victims.

### **The Results of Homelessness on Families' Lives**

The results of homelessness on parents and children alike are usually devastating. Studies have shown that food insecurity is a major problem (Chen, & Johnson, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Stronge, 1992; Whitbeck, Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997). Homeless students are twice as likely as housed students to come to school hungry and/or sick (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Hunger and anxiety over food surely causes students to be distracted and possibly even angry over not having basic needs met. This anger may lead to behavioral and other problems.

Homeless children also tend to develop emotional and behavioral disorders, physical health problems, and developmental delays (Anderson, Stuttaford, & Vostanis, 2006;

Buckner, Bassuk & Weinreb, 2000; Fraenkel, Hameline & Shannon, 2009; Hall, 2007; Johnson & Cnaan, 1995; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Kennedy, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Swick, 2007; Vissing, 1999; Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008; Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins, 1997). Also associated with the above problems is the tendency for families to experience out-of-home placement such as homeless shelters, institutional care, foster care placement with relatives, or group home care. These experiences affect children's early literacy development and contribute to the behavioral problems homeless children sometimes exhibit (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008).

The incidences of violence, drug abuse, and criminalization among homeless families are high. Teen and unwanted pregnancies, sexual abuse, as well as sexually transmitted diseases are also prevalent with this section of society (Ensign, 2006; Kennedy, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Polakow, 2007; Stronge, 1992). These factors resulting from family homelessness paint a grim picture in the lives of homeless students.

### **Services Available to the Homeless**

A variety of services exist to aid the homeless through a myriad of agencies and service providers. The response to homelessness seeks to address the multiple needs of homeless people and reflects an evolving homeless system of service (Leginski, 2007). In his paper for the 2007 National Symposium on Homelessness Research, Leginski details a proposed system of service that contains four components:

- a population experiencing homelessness,
- a set of actions and services that are offered to the population,

- organizations that deliver these services, and
- the network of funding, policies, and relationships in which these organizations operate. (p. 7)

He also suggests that current approaches to providing homeless services in their basic form consist of assisting homeless people with services offered by providers who function in a network of policies and funding (Leginski, 2007). Leginski's definition of a homeless system of service is "a coordinated, interrelated set of technologies, providers, policies, and funding streams that continually adapts to meet effectively the service needs of defined groups of persons experiencing or at risk of homelessness" (p. 8).

One of the primary burdens in providing service to the homeless is housing. Much of the housing intervention comes in the form of shelters. Shelters are typically operated by private, nonprofit organizations and provide temporary shelter (Anderson, Stuttaford & Vostanis, 2006; Fraenkel, Hameline & Shannon, 2009; Mullenix, 1999; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Permanent housing options include unsubsidized apartments, subsidized apartments, public housing, or supportive housing. "Section 8 vouchers and public housing are critical strategies for helping low-income families attain affordable housing" (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009, p. 36). Other housing services include these voucher programs as well as rental subsidy programs. The current federal voucher program is called the Housing Choice Voucher Program, also known as Section 8. It is the largest federal housing program and provides rental housing assistance that "subsidizes the difference between 30 percent of a family or individual's income and the amount needed to rent in the private market" (Khadduri, 2008, p. 2). HUD also offers a single room occupancy program that provides rental assistance and a supportive housing

program that develops supportive housing services that allow independent living for the homeless (Hud.gov, 2008). Transitional housing programs may have a specialized focus such as support to address domestic violence issues (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). State housing trust funds also serve homeless families by creating affordable housing through community resources (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). The National Center on Family Homelessness (2009) reports:

90,889 units of emergency shelter, transitional housing, and permanent supportive housing are available for families; most people on public housing and Section 8 waiting lists are families with extremely low incomes...and that 38 states have state housing trust funds. (p. 38)

Service providers also work with the homeless to find and maintain employment through employment related services such as job training, job search and job search preparation, specialized training, transportation, and childcare (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; Mullenix, 1999). Another strategy for increasing a family's income is through the State Earned Income Credit Tax Credit (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009).

Since food is a basic need, the homeless have access to several food-based programs. One program, formerly known as food stamps but now called SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) provides families with proper nutrition (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Other programs include the School Breakfast Program and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children, commonly referred to as WIC (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Along with the School Breakfast Program, students can also participate in the Free and Reduced Lunch program (National

Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Providers also offer programs to provide help working with child support agencies, domestic violence counseling, parenting classes, case management, advanced training or skill development, and money management (Mullenix, 1999; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009).

### **Barriers to Homeless Services**

Even with all the above services available to the homeless, barriers exist that prevent them from taking advantage of these services. Being unaware of how to obtain services or even that they are eligible for services is an important barrier for some homeless families (Anderson, Stuttaford, & Vostanis, 2006; Khadduri, 2008; Leginski, 2007; Mullenix, 2009). One overwhelming barrier is the shortage of affordable housing (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; Leginski, 2007; Mullenix, 1999; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Polakow, 2007). Oftentimes the nature of the housing itself is a barrier. For example, many families feel stressed and unable to cope with a shelter environment's rules, staff, and physical environment. Interactions with staff members such as security staff, housing and employment specialists, childcare workers, and case workers can be seen as demeaning creating a sense of isolation and a feeling of hopelessness (Anderson, Stuttaford, & Vostanis, 2006; Fraenkel, Hamleline, & Shannon, 2009; Swick, 2008). The rules, which can be numerous and overwhelming, create a "prison-like" atmosphere causing some families to experience a feeling of loss of control over their lives. These situations can be "degrading in the lives of homeless families and create an experience of hopelessness and disempowerment" (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009, p. 328).

Another barrier experienced by the homeless involves their inability to complete vocational job training and find employment while dealing with raising children in a

temporary housing situation or without housing altogether (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Roschelle, 2008). Homeless parents also deal with the irony of losing their public assistance, benefits, and services if they obtain employment above a minimal level (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Polakow, 2007). The circumstances homeless parents face when trying to secure employment with limited education and training sometimes elicit a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness since their low job skills exclude them from all but the most meager of jobs (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Roschelle, 2008). Their inability to remain in job training sometimes brands them with service providers as uncooperative and irresponsible leading to a strained relationship with their providers (Bullough, 2001; Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; Roschelle, 2008).

Lack of safe, reliable childcare prevents many parents from obtaining a job since they are reluctant to leave their children with nonfamily childcare providers (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Polakow, 2007; Roschelle, 2008). Family members may refuse to care for their homeless relatives' children due to their own lack of monetary or housing stability or damaged relationships with the children's parents (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009). This barrier can be especially difficult for families of color as this family disengagement goes against their cultural norms (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009). With no one to leave the children with while they are working, many homeless parents remain unemployed.

Physical and mental health problems can also be a barrier to obtaining homeless services for these families. Violations of shelter rules and regulations of obtaining

employment or behavior guidelines may result from these health problems and cause even more mental anguish (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; Roschelle, 2008; Swick, 2008). One common violation is substance abuse. Jozefowicz-Simbeni and Israel (2006) found that “homeless parents are more likely to be single women who have a substance abuse problem, mental health disorder, or physical health problem, and they are less likely than other mothers to receive services” (p. 39). A parent experiencing chronic health problems or raising a child with chronic health problems is at a great disadvantage in breaking free from the cycle of homelessness since this limits their possibilities of autonomy. Lack of access to adequate health care is also a problem experienced by at least half of America’s poor and homeless children (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009) Physical and mental health problems can also be exacerbated by homelessness or the resulting trauma of homelessness (Fraenkel, Hameline, & Shannon, 2009; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Roschelle, 2008). These and other barriers are detrimental to the homeless obtaining the services they need to break the cycle of homelessness.

### **McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act**

The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act began as the Homeless Persons Survival Act and was passed in 1987. Only the emergency component was implemented in the beginning as homelessness was becoming more widely recognized by the public and the government. This legislation is now known as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (Leginski, 2007). In its report to congress, the U.S. Department of Education defines this legislation as it pertains to education thusly:

The intent of the Education for Homeless Children and Youth program, Title VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, is to ensure that all homeless children and youth have access to the same free, appropriate public education, including a public pre-school education, as provided to other children and youth. The Act calls on States to review and revise their laws and policies to eliminate barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and success in school of homeless children and youth and to include homeless students in the mainstream school environment. (2000, p. 4)

Funds from grants are allocated to state educational agencies (SEAs) to support their state office of coordinator of education of homeless children and youth. Local educational agencies (LEAs) are required to maintain a homeless liaison within their school districts to serve the homeless children and youth whom they are required to enroll, provide the means for their success in school, ensure that homeless families receive educational services, and are given referrals to health, dental, and mental health care and other services they may need. LEAs are also “required to develop, review, and revise policies to eliminate barriers to the enrollment, attendance, and success in school of homeless children and youth ... regardless of whether they receive funds under McKinney-Vento” (Education for homeless children and youth program, 2000, p. 4).

The specific provisions in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (2008) that pertain to schools are that students have the right to:

- Remain in their school of origin
- Be given transportation to and from their school of origin
- Attend school in the vicinity of their temporary placement
- Enroll in school without proper documentation—receive immediate enrollment

- Receive enrollment and referral assistance from the district liaison
- Attend school with children who are not homeless. (p. 3)

Basically, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act requires that states remove barriers that might prohibit homeless students from obtaining an education and to provide homeless students an equitable education (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2000; Johnson & Cnaan, 1995; Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Knowlton, 2006; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Polakow, 2007; Quint, 1994; Stronge, 1992; U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997). In 2001, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was reauthorized as a part of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 1995; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009;). The McKinney Act is not a completely funded mandate, which costs schools precious money (Education for homeless children and youth program, 2000; Johnson & Cnaan, 1995; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Polakow, 2007). Schools may be reluctant to provide the mandated services for this reason.

### **Educational Ramifications for Homeless Students**

Many barriers and deficits exist for homeless students. A lack of continuity in their education and an inability to stay in school are two of the greatest problems these students face (Buckner & Bassuk, 2001; Kennedy, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Polakow, 2007; Stronge, 1992; Walker-Dalhousé & Risko, 2008; Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997). A study by the Institute for Children and Poverty (2001) showed a strong correlation between students who are chronically homeless (those having more than one episode of homelessness) and the repetition of a grade by these students and severe instances of absenteeism lasting sometimes a month or more. Because

these students tend to transfer between schools more often (Institute for Children, 2001), are more likely to repeat a grade and less likely to pass state mandated tests, and usually have no advocate in the educational system (Polakow, 2007), homeless students are more likely than non-homeless students to be placed in special education programs (Institute for Children, 2001). The 2009 State Report Card on Child Homelessness asserts that not only are homeless children twice as likely to repeat a grade, be expelled or suspended, and drop out of high school, they are less likely to be proficient in reading and math as non-homeless students (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). Problems abound in the homeless student population in low academic achievement, development and behavior problems, and attendance issues (Buckner & Bassuk, 2001; Kennedy, 2007; National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009; Newman, 1999; Polakow, 2007; Stronge, 1992; Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008; Yamaguchi, Strawser, & Higgins, 1997). The literature on the subject of homelessness is clear: Homeless students are at an obvious disadvantage to their housed counterparts.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter details the methodology used in conducting this research into understanding the challenges that service providers face in educating homeless students. In keeping with the qualitative design of this study, the research method has evolved over the course of the study. This chapter will include a perspective of the methodology, a description of the research context and participants, the instruments used for collecting data, the procedures carried out, and an analysis of the data.

Since this study deals with the lived experiences of service providers to the homeless, the qualitative research was phenomenological (van Manen, 1990). The methods involved with phenomenological research, as described by van Manen (1990), are the interaction among the activities of the nature of a lived experience, investigating the experience, reflecting on essential themes, writing and rewriting, maintaining an oriented relation to the question, and balancing the research by considering parts of the question. Van Manen (1990) called this research of the lifeworld, “human science research” (p. 78).

Van Manen (1990) defines the human lifeworld as “the lived world experienced in everyday situations and relations” (p. 101). Interviews and research were conducted keeping these four elements in mind. In phenomenological research, “the interview serves very specific purposes: it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material” to develop an understanding of human experience (van Manen, 1990, p.

66). This exploration was used in this study to gain an understanding of the challenges of service providers in educating homeless students.

### **Research Perspective**

Qualitative research was deemed the best approach for this research study because the research questions and sub questions lent themselves to interview and narrative data analysis. In keeping with the qualitative nature of my research, my research plan evolved as I learned more about the participants, such as where they worked and with whom and why they are involved in serving homeless families and their school-aged children. This perspective ties in with Bogdan and Biklen (1992) who assert that investigators may have ideas about what they will do but do not have a formal set of procedures in place prior to data collection. “The study itself structures the research, not preconceived ideas or any precise research design” (p. 58). Lincoln (1985) says that qualitative methods come more easily when humans are the instrument. In this study, human participants relayed their thoughts and experiences through semi-structured interviews.

In this study, I sought to understand the experiences the service providers I interviewed had with serving homeless families and their school-aged children. I wanted to hear from their perspectives the challenges and successes in their day-to-day interactions with homeless families, especially the children, and their interactions with the school systems with which they work. To get closer to this understanding of their experiences, I interviewed five women who work with homeless families either directly or indirectly using qualitative interviews. According to deMarrais (2004), these qualitative interviews are used when researchers want a deeper understanding from their participants about their particular experiences. With the desire to gain an understanding of their point of view and then to take

what is learned and construct a comprehensive picture using the words and experiences of the participants, the researcher asks questions that delve into those realms (deMarrais, 2004). Prior to interviewing these five participants, I had met all but two only briefly. One I had never met, and one I had known personally for some period of time. Since qualitative interviews depend on developing a rapport with participants (deMarrais, 2004), I began each interview by asking what had brought that person to the work she was doing with the homeless. Each had a very important story to tell regarding their vocational choice. This opened the door for me to engage the participants in informal conversation which naturally evolved into the interview (deMarrais, 2004). As I conducted each individual interview, I tailored the questions by adding, deleting, or changing the content, order, and even the manner in which I asked them; consequently, the questions I had planned to ask were laid aside as I allowed these women to speak freely about their experiences as service providers for the homeless. As deMarrais (2004) said in her article referencing Mishler, “interviews are not simply exchanges of questions and answers by researchers and participants, but a form of discourse where the researcher and participant engage in co-constructing meaning within a particular type of social relationship” (p. 54).

The theoretical framework used for this study is Max Weber’s life’s chances and life’s choices theory. Weber theorizes that “one’s lifestyle, and ultimately one’s quality of life, is a function of life choices as well as life chances” (LaGory, Fitzpatrick & Ritchey, 2001, p. 3). This Weberian perspective, or Weberian lifestyles approach, asserts that “life circumstances and events are life chances, often outside the control of the individual, that affect lifestyles as well as general and domain-specific quality of life” (LaGory, 2001, p. 6). Weber’s perspective gives an insight to the chronic nature of homelessness. Acknowledging

this perspective would make a great leap toward developing programs that address students' special circumstances in their quest for a quality education. It would also help people understand the cycle of homelessness and poverty experienced by this population of society

### **Research Context**

This research study was conducted using semi-structured, qualitative interviews in informal settings with policy makers, researchers, and the president of a national homeless organization, a child psychologist, a clinical director, and an executive director of a Midwestern homeless women's transitional shelter. The policy makers, researchers, and president work in a Northeastern urban area for a national organization that focuses on family homelessness, and the interviews with them were conducted at their offices. The child psychologist, clinical director, and executive director work in an urban, Midwestern area for a transitional women's shelter for single, homeless women and their children under age 12 and also took place in the individuals' offices.

The following is a description of the national organization for which two of the participants work:

[This national organization] is determined to end family homelessness. While sheltering a family provides safe haven, this is only temporary. Connecting families to permanent housing and critical supports and services can change their lives forever. Through research, we learn what families need to rebound from the economic, social, medical, and mental health problems that put them on the streets. Through program evaluation, we identify strategies that work. We use this knowledge to design innovative practices, bring training and technical assistance to community-based shelters and service providers, and improve policy across the

nation. Whether made homeless by economic hardship, domestic violence, the trauma of war, or physical or emotional challenges, these families have lost more than their homes. They've lost their health, safety, and capacity to support themselves. Their children are young; they have witnessed violence in their families and communities; they are understandably anxious and depressed. Today they need shelter. To build a life, they need support. With the power of knowledge, we can end family homelessness and give every child a chance.

The Midwestern transitional women's shelter is describes as:

...a transitional-living program whose mission is to empower single mothers and their children to break out of the cycle of homelessness and poverty. They work to help families increase income and education, achieve greater self-determination, obtain and retain permanent housing, and overcome the impact of trauma. The framework of care for [their] supportive services are based on evidence-based, consumer focused trauma-informed principles. Supportive services include: strengths-based case management; independent living skill development; community linkages to employment and educational services; psychosocial assessments; primary healthcare services; mental health and psychosocial assessments; treatment planning; individual, family, and group therapy; educational groups; parenting education; substance and mental health support groups; transportation; child care for in-house services; and consumer government and decision making including board representation. [This organization] is the first homeless shelter in the nation to offer Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT) and Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT), both evidence-based interventions.

## **Research Participants**

Qualitative researchers usually use criterion-based selections in which researchers develop a list of characteristics or attributes they want their participants to possess. One criterion-based selection technique is called network selection in which the researcher locates a participant who fits the criteria for participants and then has that person refer others who fit the criteria to the researcher (deMarrais, 2004). This is the method used in this research study to find participants.

The initial participant, Kay S., executive director of the Midwestern transitional women's shelter, referred me to the other participants in the study. Kay S. has been at Sheffield Place since its inception in early 1991. She began this organization that serves single mothers and their young children after having worked as an intern in college at another Midwestern, urban homeless shelter. She has a psychology degree and wanted to use her degree to help those whose circumstances and situations placed them at risk. Her initial work with the homeless began in the 1980's when family homelessness was just beginning to be recognized and when services began to be provided to them in a structured way. Kay S. has been recognized both locally and nationally as a leader for her service to the homeless.

Dr. Emma B., the president of the national homeless organization in the Northeastern urban area, has also been involved in serving the homeless for over twenty years. Through her work as the attending psychiatric physician at major Northeastern hospital, Dr. B. came in contact with the homeless under crisis situations. She became disenchanted in the "revolving door" care given to the homeless when these people would be turned out into the cold without a place to go. This sparked her interest in serving the chronically, mentally ill who were homeless. When she encountered a young, teenage mother and father with a

freezing baby in a cardboard box in a predominantly single men's homeless shelter, she knew that something needed to be done for homeless families. Dr. B. ran a program for her governor's administration in the 1980's, and during her tenure there wrote an article about the homeless and their chronic mental health issues and immediately became a controversial expert on the homeless. Through this notoriety, she formed a partnership with a well-known home-focused magazine and created a fund which became the national homeless organization for which she is president. She is considered the leading expert on the homeless, homeless families, and chronic mental illness issues from which the homeless suffer.

Another staff member at this Northeastern national homeless organization is Kari V. She is a trainer who trains case managers, program directors, classroom teachers, and others who come into contact with the homeless. She also creates curriculum for this training. Ms. V. became involved with family homelessness through policy interests and an internship in graduate school. Her internship involved a community action program for child services. According to Ms. V., the impetus that really grabbed her attention was that Massachusetts was housing homeless families in dilapidated hotels. She said that she even saw intact families in these seedy hotels, and that, as well as the overwhelming poverty these people were suffering through, touched her. Ms. V. describes herself as someone who likes taking complicated concepts and distilling them into something to help people. Teaching, she says, provides her a way to give a sense of pride to others.

Allie S. also works with teachers as well as students and their mothers. A graduate of Spellman University, she is the individual child therapist at the Midwestern transitional women's shelter who collaborates with educators concerning homeless students' school-

related issues including sitting in, advising, and advocating in IEP meetings, discipline meetings, and other meetings with school officials. Ms. S. is also a problem-solver for homeless students and helps families deal with problems that carry over from home to school. She consults with teachers and gets technology to aid students. Ms. S. also coordinates a program that provides tutoring to the resident moms and their children from birth to twelve and even fifteen years old.

Mary C., who is a clinical psychologist, works as the clinical director for the Midwestern transitional women's shelter. She has been at there for fewer than five years and also has her own practice. Ms. C. has worked for twenty-five years with the homeless. She works with homeless families, supports direct care staff, and encourages families to engage in their services by giving her their input into the services they receive. This allows Ms. C. to improve those services. She also facilitates appointments and intervention processes, resolves grievances of residents, reviews cases, and creates treatment plans for the resident families. Ms. C. says she wants the families to always feel that her door is open and that she is a safe resource for them.

### **Data Collection**

The qualitative data collected in this research study were gathered through semi-structured, qualitative interviews conducted during September and October 2009. Each interview lasted an average of 65 minutes. Notes were taken using pen and paper during the interviews and later assimilated and typed. Van Manen (1990) says that "the interview serves very specific purposes: it may be used as a means for exploring and gathering experiential narrative material" to develop an understanding of human experience (p. 66).

This understanding of human experience is considered phenomenological. Van Manen also says that:

the point of phenomenological research is to ‘borrow’ other people’s experiences and their reflections on their experiences in order to better be able to come to an understanding of the deeper meaning or significance of an aspect of human experience, in the context of the whole of human experience. (p. 62)

This phenomenological understanding addresses the overall research question proposed for this study: How do service providers support homeless students and their families educationally? The nature of the interviews also answered the sub questions, What challenges do service providers encounter in their work with the homeless? and What are the perceptions of what teachers need to know to meet the needs of homeless students? The experiences of providing services to homeless families were collected through these qualitative interviews.

The semi-structured interviews began with a warm-up period during which I asked the participants what brought them to their work with the homeless. This method allowed for a warming up period that relaxed both the participant and the interviewer (deMarrais, 2004). Because these five women are so passionate about their work with the homeless, I allowed them to speak freely as I took notes. I rarely interrupted with questions, but I did engage in what deMarrais calls active listening and probing for more elaboration. I remained engaged throughout the interview adding my own knowledge and experiences where appropriate. The interview questions (Appendix B) served as a guide only and changed depending upon the interviewee, and were, with the exceptions of questions number 1, 3, 6, 8, 13, 17, 19, and 20, thrown by the wayside. Since each participant chose the time and place of their interview, a

relaxed, comfortable mood characterized the interactions and allowed for me to be flexible with the order and wording of the actual questions asked.

### **Permissions and Ethical Issues**

Permission was obtained from the proper entities and through the proper channels. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted permission for this study (Appendix A). Each participant who was interviewed also signed an informed consent form which informed them of the nature of the study and that they would receive no benefits for participating. The participants were also assured that I would keep the notes from our interviews in a secure, locked location and that those documents would be kept confidential. Copies of these signed consent forms were given to each participant. Names of the clients of the participants as well as the participants' names were never used nor recorded and will not be used in the findings of this study.

Maintaining ethics in human subject research requires, as Bogdan and Biklen (1992) assert, that “subjects enter research projects voluntarily, understanding the nature of the study and the dangers and obligations that are involved, and that subjects are not exposed to risks that are greater than the gains they might derive” (p. 53). The participants in this research study meet the assertion here. Since they voluntarily participated, signed letters of informed consent, and were informed that no risks or rewards would be involved, the ethical issues are minimal.

### **Data Analysis**

Lincoln (1985) refers to data as “constructions offered by or in the sources; data analysis leads to a reconstruction of those constructions” (p. 332). In keeping with this idea, I sought to construct meanings through finding important categories and themes in the data.

A theme serves as a focus and represents a trend in information (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. Van Manen (1990) defines a theme as the focus or meaning of an anecdote that is intransitive and that captures the phenomenon one is trying to understand. He further says that “theme describes an aspect of the structure of lived experience” (p. 87). Theme, says van Manen, is the “process of insightful invention, discovery, disclosure” producing meaning through the data (p. 87).

While analyzing my data collected through interviews, I used the “wholistic” approach and the selective or highlighting approach (van Manen, 1990, pp. 92-94). The [w]holistic approach allowed me to find the main significance or meaning (van Manen, 1990). This approach may lend itself to the interpretation of the researcher. The selective or highlighting approach was used to select phrases that stood out or recurred across all the interviews (van Manen, 1990). Using the highlighting approach, I read over the transcripts of the interviews many times to find the statements or phrases that seemed essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience being described. Then, I highlighted these statements (van Manen, 1990).

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I detailed the methodology I used in this research study. The next chapter, Chapter IV, discusses the findings of the study. The recurring themes associated with the challenges service providers encounter when seeking to educate homeless children and provide services for their families found through using van Manen’s approach are discussed in depth in this next chapter as are the expected, important categories to the study including barriers experienced by the homeless, educational ramifications, and the common characteristics that the homeless share.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

During the course of this research, five women who provide services to homeless families were interviewed using a semi-structured, qualitative interview process. The participants were chosen through criterion-based, network selection. These five participants, who have all been working with homeless families for multiple years, lent their knowledge and experiences to the study of the challenges facing service providers in educating homeless children. These women all share a passion for improving the lives of the homeless through services, policy, and education. Each woman has a unique perspective to share although these perspectives intersect in categorical and thematic ways.

This chapter will report the findings from the research study. I will start by describing the interviews and interaction I had with each participant. I will then look at what I felt were recurring categories of responses that were important to the study and then at what I feel are the essential themes found in the results. Using van Manen's (1990) holistic and highlighting approach to arrive at the essential themes, I reread my interviews looking for emerging themes. Analyzing the stories these women told while looking to construct meaning thematically from them allowed me to see the themes emerge.

## Participants' Backgrounds

*Kay S.*

Ms. S. has been involved in homeless issues for over twenty years. She began her work while in college and continues to provide services to this population today. Ms. S's psychology degree led her to an understanding that people who are homeless have specific needs and that meeting these needs takes special skills and personal qualities of caring to see the homeless as people rather than just as problems. A caring relationship with a young homeless girl while Ms. S. was an intern solidified her commitment to the homeless. This young girl had suffered physical and sexual trauma and was experiencing homelessness with her family. Ms. S. was her counselor and confidante, but once the girl left the shelter, the transient nature of homelessness meant Ms. S. never saw her again. Ms. S. was informed sometime after her treatment of this girl, that the girl had been murdered by a serial killer because of the life of prostitution she was leading. Ms. S. said that helped her understand that the fact that this girl was unable to change her situation and make a different life for herself after the trauma was a persistent problem in the cycle of homelessness. Most homeless people see no other way of life, and that drew Ms. S. toward trying to make a difference so that perhaps some children could break the cycle and be saved. She makes sure that the focus of her transitional living center for homeless, single mothers and their children centers on overcoming the traumas associated with this population through counseling and education to break the cycle of homelessness and trauma. Our interview took place in Ms. S's office, and I found her to be both knowledgeable and passionate about family homelessness.

*Dr. Emma B.*

Dr. B., a native New Yorker, has been working with the homeless for more than twenty years. She is a doctor of psychiatry who was once the attending physician at a major Northeastern hospital and also worked for her governor's administration. She currently heads the national homeless organization which is based in an urban area in the Northeastern United States. Dr. B. is considered a leading expert on the homeless and has written and published numerous studies, articles, and books on caring for the homeless and breaking the cycle of trauma and poverty that contribute to their homelessness. She works with a national homeless organization to advocate for policy changes on a national level regarding services provided to the homeless. Her organization researches the plight of the homeless searching for solutions to end their suffering. Training and education are also developed through her national homeless organization to ensure that those who provide services to the homeless and their families have all the resources and current information available to assist the homeless in overcoming the obstacles facing them. After working with this population for so long, Dr. B. thinks the incidence of family homelessness has grown exponentially, but the services for them have not. I felt honored that Dr. B. granted me an interview and found her to be the expert that she is reported to be as well as a personable, caring person. Our interview was conducted in her office at the national homeless organization in the Northeast United States.

*Kari V.*

Ms. V. also works at the national homeless organization with Dr. B. and was instrumental in putting together this year's state report card on child homelessness. Ms. V., like Ms. S., was drawn to her work with the homeless through an internship in college.

Observing the homeless being treated in ways that seemed wrong to her, Ms. V. decided to make working with family homelessness her career. She mainly works as a trainer of case managers, program directors, teachers, and others who come into contact with the homeless. She wants to make sure that those who are entrusted with serving this section of society do so with all the information possible to ensure that the homeless receive the services they need in the way they need them. Ms. V. also creates curriculum for training so that those she has trained may train others. She is interested in the policies on local, state, and especially, national levels that affect the everyday lives and chances of the homeless and their children. I found Ms. V. to be a very caring person who feels that the work she does makes a difference. Our interview was conducted in her office in the Northeast and was a casual interaction that lasted a little over an hour.

*Allie S.*

Ms. S. has a master's degree in child psychology and counseling from Spellman University. She serves as the individual child therapist for the Midwestern transitional women's shelter. Ms. S. considers herself a problem solver for homeless children with their school- and family-related issues. She sits in on IEP meetings, disciplinary meetings, and any other school-related meeting a homeless family may have to attend. She advocates for not only the student but also for the mother who sometimes feels intimidated and overwhelmed by a system she has likely been unsuccessful in herself. Ms. S. also works with area teachers to help them better understand the homeless students with which they work and their specific and unique problems. She also procures technology to enable homeless students to stay up with housed students in their work. She understands that homeless students need to feel a sense of normalcy in order to function well in school.

Sometimes this normalcy can be achieved with just a different pair of shoes or a different outlook on life, she says. Ms. S. was a delight to interview. We met in the child and family therapy area for the interview where she felt most comfortable since most of her work with the homeless students and their families takes place there. I found Ms. S. to not only be knowledgeable about the needs of the homeless, but a passionate advocate for them.

*Mary C.*

Ms. C. is the clinical director for the Midwestern transitional women's shelter and serves the homeless mothers and their children who are residents there in a variety of ways. As a clinical psychologist, she works with the families to break out of their cycles of behavior and beliefs to enable them to make better decisions and thus better lives for themselves. She has worked with the homeless population for twenty-five years and sees it as her life's work. Ms. C. also supports the direct care staff at the organization and makes decisions about the care of the residents based on a trauma-informed approach which allows her to look at the causes of behavior in order to best address that behavior and make strategies to change it. She believes the homeless need to learn to live outside their usual ways of life to break free from their cycles of destructive behavior. Ms. C. encourages the shelter residents to make better decisions for themselves and their families, but stresses that the decisions they make are their own. She is passionate about working with traumatized women and children making sure they get the best services possible and ensuring that they are educated about those services. Ms. C. also has an interest in helping those who work with domestic violence victims, those who work in hospices, and those who serve the homeless to provide the best services possible. We met in Ms. C's office and chatted comfortably. While Ms. C. is known to be rather quiet, I found that encouraging her with a

smile, a nod, or an affirmation kept her relaying to me the work about which she is passionate.

While interviewing the five service providers and then rereading their responses, I found myself drawn to the importance of certain categories which I expected to find such as those that follow. Most any exploration of the challenges of homeless service providers would include these aspects.

### **Expected Categories**

After reading the literature for this study and interviewing my participants, I expected certain categories important to the study to come up. These categories of barriers for the homeless, common characteristics in the homeless, and the role of the educational system seemed too important to ignore as they are traditionally considered in any discussion of providing services to the homeless. Although they were not emerging themes, they are important to the understanding of the challenges facing service providers in educating homeless students, and any study must include a discussion of these categories.

#### ***The Category of Barriers for the Homeless***

The service providers all felt that poverty, the lack of enough money to support oneself and one's family, is a major barrier in the homeless experience that prevents them from participating in life, in society, and in education the same as housed people do. Many problems stem from the poverty experienced by the homeless. Lack of affordable housing in the United States prevents poverty-stricken homeless families from obtaining permanent living quarters. All five participants said that housing is a critical issue, and that the lack of affordable housing prevents the homeless from becoming housed. Dr. Emma B. said that "we need permanent, supportive housing interventions." She also said that the number of

housing vouchers is limited; there are not enough vouchers given out to meet the growing numbers of homeless families. Without vouchers, the participants said, homeless families cannot afford to house their families. Service providers cannot provide services if none are available. In a more specific way, Dr. B. said that poverty is a huge problem, and because of that, homelessness is growing with one in fifty in the U.S. experiencing homelessness. The challenges are the gaps in the structure of service. Affordable housing is in short supply, income does not match the cost of living, and raising a child is very expensive were sentiments echoed by all the participants.

Kari V. says that these three aspects make breaking the cycle of homelessness very difficult and makes the job of the service provider extremely challenging. Ms. V. also reiterated what the other participants said and that is that the cycle of poverty must be broken through policy changes that would provide more affordable housing, more vouchers for those who need them, and a minimum wage that a family can survive on. Ms. V. also pointed out that the lifetime earnings and contributions to society that the homeless make are significantly less than those who are housed. Kay S. put it this way: “Housing is a critical issue with the homeless, but not the only factor. Families need more than just housing; they need the support, skills, income, and education that will allow them to break the cycle of homelessness.” Ms. S. also said that people should understand that housing impacts themselves as members of society because disenfranchised people like the homeless make society weaker. She, as well as the other participants, believes that if all members of a society are productive, then everyone wins and the society is better for it.

Allie S. went a step further to say that public assistance is not enough. Basic needs like food and clothing must be met. If not, this causes anger and other negative emotions.

Service providers must work as a team to give wrap around treatment to help the homeless overcome the multitude of problems they face. The social and economic instability that families struggle with causes challenges in educating them and in providing services to overcome these challenges. Mary C. echoes this sentiment and adds that there are just not enough resources to assist the homeless, including the people to provide services. Other barriers to those resources are homeless people's lack of awareness of how and where to obtain the services. Since non-profits do not advertise and most homeless have limited or no access to telephones and transportation, the people who need the services are often barred from obtaining what they need. Ms. C. said another challenge in addition to affordable housing is the lack of employment available for homeless people whose employability is limited by their job skills. She believes this lack of accessibility negatively affects the ability of homeless families to obtain the services they need for their school-aged children as well.

### ***The Category of Common Characteristics in the Homeless***

Many common characteristics are inherent in the homeless which challenges service providers even more. Unfortunately, according to the five providers interviewed, these characteristics are passed from one generation to the next causing a cycle of poverty and homelessness that is very difficult to break. The services that these providers attempt to supply the homeless population seek to identify and treat these problems from which the homeless tend to suffer.

In the early 1980's when family homelessness emerged as a new phenomenon, services began to be provided in a structured way, and providers changed their approach to the services offered to the homeless. According to Dr. B. and Ms. Kay S., providers realized that homelessness needed to be treated as a chronic problem rather than an episodic one as it

had been previously. Those who provide services to the homeless have woven a web of care that extends past the time when a family is in a shelter to address those characteristics the homeless tend to pass down through the generations. After shelter, or after care, services now include traditional case management, independent skills education, budgeting and money management education, landlord-tenant relations issues, communication training, counseling, and more depending on the organization and its client base. Some organizations also provide services such as mental health assessments and therapeutic interventions, individual and group/family counseling, and parenting skills education. Evidence-based therapeutic interventions that teach a parent how to parent including parent-child therapy are structured to not only teach parents to relate to their children but also to break the recurring cycle of poor decisions by modeling good parenting behavior for children. These organizations recognize that they need to provide behavior modification programs to parents and their children to support them in making good decisions. These activities seek to strengthen the parent-child bond, and through coping strategies, overcome detrimental parenting strategies that keep the cycle of homelessness and the behaviors that cause homelessness continuing.

### ***The Category of the Role of the Educational System***

The system of education in the United States plays a large role in the lives of homeless students and their families. Because of this, the providers I interviewed said that those who work in education in this country have an obligation to be educated on the laws and provisions pertaining to their homeless students. The only legislation that does address these laws is the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The service providers interviewed expressed frustration that many educators not only do not know that they have

homeless students in their schools they also do not know what provisions are made for them in McKinney-Vento. They suggest overcoming this problem with education in the form of professional development workshops conducted by local organizations as well as national organizations like the National Center on Family Homelessness. This national organization develops curriculum just to educate teachers on the special needs of the homeless. Mary C. adds that educators also need clear policies on how to report child neglect, abuse, and suspected homelessness. She also says that educators need to learn their responsibilities and obligations to report observed problems like hunger, negative emotions, etc. Teachers need to learn trauma-informed strategies, understand who they have in their classrooms, and have access to records from other schools, according to Ms. C. This record sharing is often a problem considering the transient nature of some homeless families.

All the participants agreed that educators are challenged by their lack of awareness of individual students' needs, where each student is coming from, and what the student's potential is. These challenges arise because of the aforementioned transience of homeless families, lack of well-prepared school personnel, and lack of funding. Since McKinney-Vento is only partially funded in some areas and not funded at all in other areas, according to Dr. B., the standards for providing services vary. Even with McKinney-Vento's provision that allows students to remain in their home school even though they may have moved out of the district, students still bounce from school to school. This cause many challenges in providing services. Lack of continuity between schools, lack of record sharing, and a lack of student stability make it difficult for educators to successfully provide homeless students with the services they need.

The participants suggested that schools be a center of stability for students and that they be a center for services as well. Dr. B. thinks that schools should be a “one-stop shop” for services for the homeless and that educators be a “stable and consistent support” for homeless children. The problem lies in the mission of the school, the funding the school receives, and the preparation school personnel receive. Dr. B. also relayed to me that class action lawsuits are sometimes necessary to “force school systems to behave themselves.” She told of a school that was purposely not notifying parents about their choices concerning which school district their children were eligible to attend. The aforementioned challenges in providing services, the mission, funding, and personnel training, may be the reason for this. Mostly, though, the service providers that I interviewed were sympathetic toward educators. They see the deficiencies in services provided by schools as a product of the system of education in place in the United States and not with the individual schools or teachers themselves. They suggest that policy changes regarding funding and teacher preparation be addressed. Along with these changes, they suggest teacher training in how to work with homeless children and their families using the trauma-informed, non-judgmental approach. Kay S. says that schools must first make sure homeless students are in school by providing transportation mandated in McKinney-Vento. The challenges there are funding and staffing.

Another recurrent idea among participants was that parents and teachers be prepared to work together. Along with providing training to educators concerning McKinney-Vento, they suggested that school personnel provide written details concerning services provided to students to all parents so that homeless parents did not have to feel ashamed of taking the pamphlets or papers on which this information is written. Their thinking is that if all parents were given the information, those who needed it would take advantage of it more often. A

common suggestion was to put this information in the “back to school” packet that all students take home at the beginning of each school year. They also suggest that district homeless liaisons, also mandated by McKinney-Vento, be more proactive in advocating for services, including counseling and tutoring, and for the rights of the homeless student, and that the state homeless liaison take a more active role in ensuring that training concerning homeless student issues be required by teachers.

The participants felt that the strengths of the school were that schools provide stability and that teachers usually give students a sense of security and self-esteem. Allie S. feels that teachers can provide positive reinforcement to show homeless students that teachers care. However, in some schools the challenge is in the numbers of students they have to serve. Because of these high numbers, schools sometimes do not have enough personnel to address all students’ needs. Sometimes homeless students are invisible in that schools are unaware that they even have a homeless situation. With their limited resources, both monetary and in numbers of personnel, schools can only do so much to help homeless students.

A challenge for the educational system is in getting the information about the home lives of children in an effort to better meet their needs. Another challenge is dealing with the lack of preparation and funding to fully educate homeless students. All the participants expressed sympathy and empathy for educators in their quest to serve the needs of homeless students. They all understand that the challenges facing educators are often caused by federal policies and are not the fault, in most cases, of the local school systems and individual teachers. The participants all agree that a concerted effort among all providers of services to

the homeless will help to overcome the challenges that face them all in their quest to educate homeless children and attempt to break the cycle of homelessness in America.

### **Emerging Themes**

In examining the experiences of these five service providers for the homeless, I have read and reread the answers from my interview questions to find common themes. I have grouped the recurring themes that have emerged into four broad categories. “In determining the universal or essential quality of a theme our concern is to discover aspects or qualities that make a phenomenon what it is and without which the phenomenon could not be what it is” (van Manen, 1990, p. 107). An essential theme is determined, according to van Manen, when the researcher determines if the phenomenon is still the same if the theme is changed or deleted from the phenomenon. In asking myself if the phenomenon is still the same if the theme is changed, I determined that it is not the same; therefore, the themes are valid.

All five interviews generated common words, phrases, concepts, problems, and solutions for the homeless. All of the service providers for the homeless who participated in this study mentioned the persistent nature of poverty and homelessness, common perceptions by others of the homeless, the necessity of a trauma-informed approach, and the lack of time in making a difference in homeless families’ lives. These themes highlight the challenges that service providers experience when trying to provide services to the homeless which affect the education of homeless students. The remainder of this chapter explains these themes that were identified through the interview and data analysis process.

#### ***The Theme of the Persistence of Poverty and Homelessness***

One of the components keeping this cycle of homelessness and poverty continuing is a lack of positive social skills. Recognizing that some people have limitations that are not

present in the general population helps providers see where the homeless are coming from. Ms. B., Ms. C., and Ms. S. said that homeless people cannot be successful in life as easily as other people because of the factors that brought them to homelessness including their social deficits. The homeless often do not have strong family bonds and support as most other families do. All five participants interviewed said that we should not assume that everyone is the same or even close to the “top” or even able to achieve this top. The homeless are often intimidated by authority and do not even know how or whom to ask for what they need; they are ashamed, and this shame makes them less likely to seek help for their families. That shame and embarrassment carries over to their children who repeat the cycle of not asking for help or even identifying themselves as someone who needs help.

Each provider interviewed had a story of a child who had concocted a story to protect himself or herself from being discovered as homeless. One story was of a young pre-teen girl who wanted her classmates to think that the reason she walked to the homeless shelter after school was because her mother worked there. A young boy walked several blocks out of his way with his friends until each of them had gone into his home before he turned the corner to head back to the homeless shelter where he really lived. These are just two stories of homeless students who did not want the shame of homelessness. The additional educational needs of the homeless apply to the entire family. Ms. V., Ms. S., and Ms. C. highlighted the fact that services for homeless families almost always focus on the mother. These providers regard individual child services as essential to ensure success for the child. Through the family systems theory, providers recognize that the experiences a homeless child is having set the tone for his or her future. If providers know that a child is homeless

and what that child is experiencing, they may be able to point the student in the right direction to help break the cycles of negativity that keep the homeless down.

Chronic mental illness and substance abuse also characterize the homeless. Some of the most common mental illnesses are simply manifested in behavioral disorders. Homeless students are often loud and disruptive displaying destructive, defiant, and extremely aggressive behaviors in the classroom. A multitude of negative outcomes are the result of these behaviors. One of the primary outcomes is a developmental delay due to this behavior and the absences from school that ensue. Ms. Allie S. says that homeless students are not only developmentally behind, they are also behind in understanding their emotions. They have extreme anger issues that they do not understand, and this often shuts these kids down. Dr. B. wrote an article in the 1980's suggesting that homelessness is a mental health issue. She, as well as the other providers interviewed, also see substance abuse as a common factor in homelessness. Substance abuse issues often get families kicked out of shelters, but there are not enough beds in rehab for those who need them, according to Mary C. She also says that "change can only happen on an individual level with individual relationships. Providers must take a holistic approach." Since substance abuse is usually hidden and help is limited, it is challenging to supply the correct treatment for the amount of time needed to overcome the addiction.

Domestic violence also creates challenges for service providers. The mother who must flee her abusive husband or boyfriend with her children at a moment's notice often knows of no safe place to run. Doubling up, or staying with relatives and friends, tends to be stressful for all involved. Sometimes families and friends become estranged because of this doubling up and the fleeing family burns all their bridges and winds up on the street. Ms. C.

reports that in her experience with this problem it is difficult for a mother and her three kids, on average, to live in one room of someone else's house, have lights out at the home owner's request, and be quiet at a certain time, especially if a child is sick or frightened. These problems cause families to be removed. A single mother also has a difficult time holding down a job when she is in a domestic violence situation because of the housing issue and because she may have visible bruises and broken bones. Another problem with doubling up is that the family must stay someplace that belongs to someone else, which causes self-esteem issues. Ms. C. classifies this as a traumatic experience. The moms are scared and their kids pick up on her emotions. This fear often is reflected in negative behavior that repeats that cycle of violence. All five participants report that the kids get angry because they do not have their own "stuff," the right shoes, clean clothes, or nice school supplies, and they lash out. When they move, as they do frequently, they lose friends. They must constantly worry about if, when, and what they will eat; when and where they will sleep; will mom get beaten up, etc. They exhibit the "fight, flight, freeze" response and express these feelings in anger and the cycle continues. These kids often have no control over anything, so they lash out to control whom they punch. Service providers feel extremely challenged in trying to provide the right services to break this cycle of violence. These situations culminate in feelings of hopelessness and defeat for all parties involved.

### ***The Theme of Perceptions of the Homeless***

Perceptions of the homeless by the general public, policy makers, service providers, and even the homeless themselves can present challenges to providing services to them. Stereotypes abound when people think of the homeless. These perceptions are multifaceted and looking at the differences in homelessness may be perceived differently depending upon

who is looking. According to the participants interviewed, some people still think of the homeless as being bums, hobos, and smelly people mumbling to themselves on the street and place all the blame for their problems on the homeless person. While some homeless people do fit this profile, the incidence of family homeless is growing exponentially and homeless families do not generally fit this description. The “bootstrap” mentality of the Midwest also contributes to negative stereotypes of the homeless. According to Kay S., the Midwestern idea of pulling oneself up by the bootstraps during troubled times is a challenge to overcome. Some people just do not have the skills or opportunities to pull themselves up. The demographics of homelessness have changed to include the fastest growing segment of homelessness consisting of a single mother and her children. Dr. B. said that “female-headed households have increased from one in twenty to one in five and are among the poorest people in society.” Dr. B. feels that this is the largest, most significant change in the make-up of homelessness. The other participants agreed.

Even though Dr. B. reports that kids are usually less judgmental and easier to teach tolerance, they still shun and taunt those they feel are inferior or different from them. Homeless students are perceived this way, and so their classmates often make fun of them. This negative stigma perpetuates the perceptions by others of the homeless students’ inferiority or differentness. Homeless students who change schools often may fail to have long-lasting friendships that housed students take for granted. The participants all suggested having assemblies or some other type of program to alleviate this stigma. They also feel that if homeless students can be encouraged to overcome their shame and embarrassment and speak to their peer about their experiences to de-mystify their predicaments. Usually kids are

receptive to others' points of view and have great empathy, so having an awareness of homeless students' points of view may help housed students more easily accept them.

### ***The Theme of the Trauma-Informed Approach***

The interviewees agreed that in order to best serve this section of the homeless population, trauma-informed care needs to be the norm in treating their needs. Kay S. suggests strongly that case managers, shelter staff, school personnel, and all others who provide services to homeless families adopt a policy of "universal precautions" to treat the homeless. These universal precautions do not refer to blood-borne pathogens in this case but rather to using a trauma-informed approach when dealing with the homeless. She suggests that providers and school personnel make the assumption that every student and family needs some kind of services and to treat them all with dignity and respect. This trauma-informed care involves understanding trauma in an economical, structural, and interpersonal way. The training involves first changing the service providers' behavior in order to then change the person's behavior who is experiencing or has experienced the trauma. Instead of approaching issues with the homeless with blame and put-downs, the trauma-informed approach calls for understanding the reasons behind the issues. Exposure to trauma impacts the functioning and decision making of these families and students. Providers do not need details of the trauma to address it; they just need to approach the affected with respectful responsiveness in a spirit of understanding. All involved or that come in contact with the homeless could and should be trained in the trauma-informed approach according to all five participants.

Another component of the trauma-informed approach is being pro-active in protecting homeless children from ridicule and finding ways to supply them with basic necessities such

as food, clothing, and supplies needed for school. Ms. Kay S. cautions those who provide services to homeless students to remember to look at the potential basic needs of students. It is also in knowing what students' needs are and not stereotyping them while responding to their unique needs. She, as well as the other participants, said that all who come in contact with the homeless, including teachers, should be trained on issues of homelessness. This lack of preparation, they say, is a large detriment and challenge in providing the services they need.

The participants also said that providers should resist the temptation to blame the homeless for their problems. They said that organizations from all levels, local, state, and federal, provide services more efficiently when they are trained to work together in a trauma-informed way. When the service providers work together, the standards of service are improved. In a perfect world, Ms. S. and Ms. C. say, providers would communicate with other organizations and meet together to decide the services each family needs to receive. In this model, schools and social service agencies as well as shelter staff could work together, share information, and reach a consensus on who will provide which services. Kari V. said that "the key to serving these families and students is to know their background in making trauma-informed decisions." Some think that the homeless are unmotivated and prefer to stay under the care of social service agencies and shelters. This attitude is even shared by some who provide those services. Using a trauma-informed approach when serving the homeless makes providing services to them more successful and meaningful.

### ***The Theme of Lack of Time***

Making a difference in the life of a homeless family takes time. Often providers do not get that time due to the transient nature and characteristics of their clients. Just as with

the story of the girl who left the homeless shelter where Ms. S. was counseling her only to wind up murdered, more time may have resulted in a different outcome in that situation. Changing behaviors and attitudes takes time that some homeless do not have. They get caught up in the necessities of providing for their families and even in trying to keep their families together. If a family leaves before their family counseling or parent-child intervention or parenting skills training is complete, those services have not been as affective as they could have been if given enough time.

Time makes a big difference in therapeutic interventions as well. Counselors need time with a homeless person or family in order to help them be successful at breaking the cycles of behavior such as poor parenting, poor self image, violence, or substance abuse which takes months and sometimes years. The homeless cannot be successful in seeing themselves differently and overcoming the cycle of homelessness if enough time for therapy is not available. Another problem with that is the fact that not enough service providers are available to offer this therapy. Ms. C. attributes the lack of staffing partly to overwhelming burn-out. Working with this marginalized population is frustrating and oftentimes unrewarding, and without the time to see the results of their interventions, the staff members working most closely with the homeless sometimes grow disenchanted with the process and leave the field.

In Chapter IV, I have discussed categories of importance to the study that I felt must be included in findings concerning challenges facing service providers in educating homeless students. These categories of barriers, common characteristics, and the role of the educational system are critical in understanding the overall challenges faced by those who seek to provide services to the homeless. I also detailed the themes I saw emerging from the

data I collected through the interviews I conducted with the five service providers. After using van Manen's highlighting approach, the themes of the persistence of poverty, the perceptions by others of the homeless, the establishment of the trauma-informed approach, and the theme of the lack of time to make a difference emerged. I feel these themes are the best representation of the experiences the participants shared with me during our interviews.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

After interviewing the five service providers who work primarily with homeless families, I feel confident that the themes associated with the challenges they face in regard to providing services to homeless families and their school-aged children have been objectively represented. I have endeavored to provide an understanding of these challenges and how they affect not only the homeless families and students themselves but also the service providers. In particular, this study focused on perceived shortcomings with the systems, people, and funding involved in services for the homeless.

#### **Research Problem**

This study examined the experiences of five providers of services to homeless families. In discussing the idea of the research study, van Manen (1990) wrote that “lived experience is the breathing of meaning” (p. 36). He also suggested that experience expresses the essence of something meaningful. I have tried to relay the experiences of these service providers to bring meaning and understanding to those experiences. The purpose of this research study was to gain an understanding of how service providers address the needs of homeless families, especially their school-aged children, in terms of support to and from various entities including schools

## Understanding the Research Questions

The research question and sub questions that formed this study are:

- How do service providers support homeless students and their families?
  - What challenges do service providers encounter in their work with the homeless?
  - What are the perceptions of service providers regarding what teachers need to know about meeting the needs of their homeless students?

In addressing how this study has deepened the understanding of these questions, one must look at the categories found to be important, the themes that emerged, as well as the implications in this study. It is now apparent that homeless families do not choose to be homeless nor is breaking out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness easy considering how difficult it is for some homeless to obtain not only housing but also employment. The fact that some of the characteristics that seem inherent in the homeless, such as emotional, physical, social, and educational detriments, as well as the educational ramifications of being transient, keep the homeless in their situations and prevent providers from lending the support to these families they need.

This study has also led to an awareness that the homeless are often not on an even playing field with the rest of society due to the persistence in the cycle of behaviors the homeless often exhibit. The shame and embarrassment that prevents the homeless from identifying themselves and asking for help is a phenomenon that also resonates, especially considering the negative attitudes about them held by some people. The time factor is a surprising theme in that considerations concerning time that include therapeutic interventions

and educational opportunities actually hinge on the time a provider has to achieve any results with a homeless family. These are critical challenges experienced by service providers.

In considering the question of what service providers perceive as necessary for teachers to know in providing what homeless students need, the trauma-informed approach idea resonated. Knowing what mandates are allowed in McKinney-Vento will certainly improve the basic problems of educating homeless students, but approaching those students with a trauma-informed attitude will invariably improve the climate in the classroom and in the school as a whole for these students.

### **Review of Methodology**

For this research study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with five long-time service providers to homeless families. These five women are leaders in their field, and their experiences and perspectives lent credibility to their input. Van Manen's thematic highlighting approach was used to analyze the data gained from those interviews. This credibility is important in seeking to understand that providing the services needed, including the educational opportunities homeless students require to break the cycle of homelessness, is critical to our society. Their credibility also is important in understanding the challenges service providers face in providing those services. Max Weber's theory of life's chances and life's choices certainly is demonstrated here when examining the chronic nature of homelessness. Without the services these professionals provide, the homeless have little chance of breaking this cycle.

## Variations on Categories

### *Barriers*

The barriers faced by both the providers of services to the homeless and the homeless themselves prevent this population from reaching their fullest potential. These barriers included poverty, lack of affordable housing, lack of housing vouchers, and the overall inability of the homeless to provide their own basic needs. Some believe, though, that instead of taxpayers throwing more money at these cyclical problems, the homeless should depend on faith-based organizations to help them. While some homeless do seek the assistance of churches and other faith-based services like food pantries and clothing giveaways, the numbers of homeless and their various needs are too vast for these organizations to address. Usually pastors conduct counseling sessions with their parishioners, but few are trained to deal with the unique problems of the homeless.

Others believe that the homeless are the responsibility of their extended families; unfortunately, their extended families are usually in the same dire straits since homelessness and poverty tend to be shared traits in some families. Not everyone has someone to take them in. Some also believe that all a homeless person needs is a job, but even with a full time, minimum wage job, a two bedroom apartment is too expensive for a single mother to afford. Some even believe that the homeless are without a roof over their heads by choice. This is a great misconception. Most homeless people would rather be housed.

### *Characteristics*

Americans have a tendency to blame those who are victims of these problems for their behavior. Oftentimes, the person knows no better. A person born into violence and aggression tends to repeat those patterns. Some are born already addicted to alcohol, drugs,

and nicotine. Those who are mentally ill or physically ill have no control over those illnesses. Children living in these conditions often have limited or no other role models other than those they live with. The characteristics of the homeless such as chronic mental illness, behavioral problems, domestic violence, and substance abuse and the cycles of behavior that prevent them from breaking free of their situations keep the homeless from getting the most out of what the service providers are trying to give them. Playing the blame game does little to break these cycles.

Kay S. told a story of a young girl she bonded with during a summer internship at an inner city homeless shelter in a Midwestern, urban metropolitan area who wound up being murdered. This girl never had a chance to achieve a normal, productive life. The service providers I interviewed want people to know that some homeless people have no chance to better themselves.

### *Educational System*

Schools can be safe havens and hubs for distribution of services, but McKinney-Vento is underfunded and in some cases unfunded. This, as well as lack of teacher preparation about homelessness, policies concerning the homeless, and a lack of public awareness prevents schools from becoming those safe places and centers of distribution. The participants in this study reported that sometimes educators are reluctant to fulfill their obligations to homeless students because of the costs to the system and personal costs of time. Trauma-informed approaches to dealing with the problems of homelessness would help alleviate this reluctance. These service providers understand the enormous burdens already on teachers' shoulders in educating students, but feel that these small changes will make a big difference in the lives of homeless families. They believe that teachers can help

these students break the cycle of homelessness present in their families through understanding, acceptance, and educational opportunities.

### **Variations on Themes**

#### *Persistence of Poverty and Homelessness*

Shame and embarrassment keep homeless families from identifying themselves and seeking the help through services and programs to which they are entitled. The assumption that all people need to succeed in life is hard work, determination, and motivation does not apply in all situations. While these qualities serve most people well, some begin life with a deficit that it nearly impossible to overcome: the cyclical nature of homelessness and poverty. This cycle is exacerbated by the shame that accompanies it. This reluctance to seek help keeps generations of families in poverty and without homes.

The invention of stories that explain their having to go to a homeless shelter after school is one of the ways homeless children protect themselves from discovery. Another excuse for homelessness involves doubling up. One girl told her classmates that her family was living with her great-aunt and uncle while their house was being remodeled. Homeless children concoct stories to make sure that their homelessness is not discovered by their peers. These, as well as other, stories, though, are the very problems that prevent them from receiving services and keep them in their situations.

The providers I interviewed suggested that part of the system that allows the continuation of poverty and homelessness is that service providers tend to focus all their services on the mother rather than the child. The key to breaking the cycle, the providers think, is in focusing on the children. Sometimes they feel it is too late or not feasible to try to retrain an adult's patterns of behavior.

Chronic mental illness, substance abuse and domestic violence also perpetuate the cycle of homelessness and poverty. The result of hiding these problems is the same as for hiding their homelessness, no help is obtained if no one knows help is needed. Sometimes the person affected does not recognize that she needs help, and this also allows the problem to persist. The negative behaviors such as aggression and defiance only make all these problems worse. The homeless must first identify themselves and seek help if they are ever to break the cycle of poverty and homelessness.

### *Perceptions of the Homeless*

Some homeless people do fit the stereotype of the bum on the corner holding the sign, but more and more often today, the homeless are family units that consist primarily of a single mother with two or three young children. These mothers are often children of poverty, victims of sexual abuse and domestic violence, or of substance abuse. They have often been in the social services system as children themselves. The public perception of the homeless, the negative treatment of them by some, lack of trauma-informed care, and lack of understanding of why they are homeless and what their needs are cause gaps in care. Often people assume that the homeless are lazy and unmotivated or that they are just out to live off the system. Usually, this is not the case. Their life choices and life chances sometimes preclude them from living the productive life that others do. This is not always due to a choice, but sometimes just the absence of chances.

When a homeless mother or student comes into contact with service providers, school personnel, or other perceived figures of authority, they feel intimidated. When those people become angry and frustrated with the homeless, the homeless shut down or lash out. According to the providers I interviewed, this happens often causing the homeless to avoid

those they consider to be in power. The homeless feel they have no power, and when they come into contact with people who do not use trauma-informed strategies, negative results ensue. Forming a rapport with a homeless person who has experienced the trauma of abuse, assault, or addiction is difficult for service providers. That is why all the providers I interviewed stressed that trauma-informed approaches in dealing with the homeless are more productive ways of handling those interactions.

### *Trauma-Informed Approach*

The participants all stressed that since the homeless have likely experienced many traumas that have contributed to their homelessness, a trauma-informed approach is best. One participant said that it does no good to try to help people who are scared and traumatized by yelling at them. Sometimes service providers become frustrated by the seemingly uncooperative behavior of the homeless for which they care, but showing that frustration only causes more negative behavior. The service providers I interviewed suggested taking a deep breath and calmly asking questions that get to the root of an issue. Expressing understanding, empathy, and tolerance toward those who are traumatized is a much better approach than blame and shouting.

The participants in this study feel that it is imperative that those who educate homeless students should be trained in the trauma-informed approach. Ms. Kay S. suggests that a shift in paradigm is in order in the field of education. She says that if a student is sleeping or appears sleepy in class, for example, instead of calling him lazy and assuming that he is being defiant, teachers should consider that he may just be tired because he is homeless and had no safe place to sleep or that he is stressed over a family situation. She

stressed that teachers should not allow homeless students or any other student to be truly lazy or unmotivated, but that the reasons should be considered rather than assumptions made.

Ms. C. thinks that an important problem is that not all service providers and educators have been trained on the trauma-informed approach. She said that providers need to work together to supply the best services to the homeless. She also revealed that sometimes the homeless lose their safe place in a shelter because of the lack of trauma-informed care and the lack of communication between agencies who should work together. She believes that training for all who come into contact with the homeless on trauma-informed care would make a big difference in whether the services the homeless receive the services they need.

#### *Lack of Time*

The lack of time that some service providers experience when helping homeless families results in a lack of effectiveness of those services. This lack of time also results in frustration for all involved. Since counseling and therapeutic interventions require several sessions lasting several months, the lack of time to complete this therapy is detrimental. Time to heal and change negative behavior patterns is precious.

Educators also need time with homeless students if they are to make a difference in these students' lives. Students who frequently change schools miss out on valuable instruction that takes place over time. Dr. B. referred to those who "bounce" from school to school as being more likely to experience developmental delays. These students need the consistency of education that time affords. Time in school can be thought of in grading periods such as semesters. If a student bounces to several schools during a semester's time, the curriculum or subject matter being taught in these schools will likely vary causing a student to miss instruction and knowledge just because he or she did not have enough time in

one school. Teachers also need time to get to know their students and develop that all important rapport that is critical to educating the whole student. Homeless students rarely get to establish those connections because time is something over which they have no control. The participants in this study expressed empathy for teachers who deal with this lack of time.

### **Implications**

The implications of understanding the challenges facing service providers in educating homeless students are many. Overcoming these challenges can be achieved if the recommendations of the study participants are put into practice. Caregivers of these students such as teachers, counselors, administrators, school nurses, homeless liaisons, and shelter personnel should make themselves aware of the many challenges facing these students and act accordingly. Homeless children deserve the same rights as non-homeless children. Mostly, though, they deserve to be treated with dignity and their educations valued so that they can break the cycle of life's chances and life's choices that have not been kind to them.

Advocacy can take many forms and advocacy is needed for homeless students. On a large scale, national advocacy groups work on behalf of the homeless by lobbying Congress and educating people about the conditions of the homeless (Polakow, 2007). These groups make a big difference in the way some see the problems of the homeless. Other programs educate teachers. One teacher remarked after receiving training, "The greatest challenge was trying not to blame the kids or their families for having fallen through the cracks of society...In many ways we refused to acknowledge our own prejudices and bias regarding the homeless population. We had little understanding of their plight" (Polakow, 2007). Thankfully, some education is taking place. Other advocacy programs include the school meal program that improves the nutritional health of children; school health services that

include general health screenings, vision and hearing screenings, and dental services as well as hygiene products that increase the attendance of homeless students; school clothing support which includes athletic gear; supportive services addressing safety and security needs help homeless children to focus and concentrate in school; transportation services to ensure the students get to school safely; before- and after-school programs provide safe places for students to play and study; record-handling services that comply with FERPA; homebound services, mentor and counseling services, and so much more (Johnson, 1992). These services supply homeless students and their families much needed resources that are sometimes the difference between staying in school and staying away from school.

The participants in the study agreed that teacher preparation on issues and the rights of their homeless students are critical. They suggest that training could be provided during beginning of the year in-services in which all teachers participate or during other teacher conferences or staff development days. Training on the provisions granted homeless students by McKinney-Vento is a must, they say, since as Dr. B. points out, “McKinney-Vento is a big part of what we can do for homeless students.” Kay S. suggests that in back to school packet most schools send home the first day of school be a questionnaire that asks probing questions resulting in identifying those students who are homeless. The training that all the providers suggest includes teaching educators how to identify homeless students by listening to what students say about where and how they are living. If a student describes living with multiple people in one room or multiple families under one roof, it should trigger a response in the teacher to investigate further to see if this student is doubled up due to some situation in the student’s family life. They also suggest that if a child wears the same clothes several days in a row or their clothes are ill-fitting or tattered, a child may be homeless. Sometimes

homeless students come to school dirty and hungry as well, so teachers need to be trained to be on the lookout for those identifying markers.

Another suggestion made by this group is to create service learning programs for the entire student population. Dr. B. says that her national homeless organization is developing service learning and poverty curriculum for schools to be provided by the government to school systems. These service learning programs will mobilize children because “small children are not as prejudiced.” Ms. V. told of an online program that is being developed that teaches students and educators to help others. This program is based on the “No Task is too Small” idea utilized by Zack Bonner, a young boy who walked thousands of miles to raise awareness for homeless children. He calls his program the Little Red Wagon Foundation. Volk also shared that she believes that if children communicate openly with one another, the stigma and other negative characteristics of homelessness will be lessened.

The results of this study show that many caring professionals are working hard for the rights of homeless students. These professionals need policy, structural, and monetary support to achieve the goals of breaking the cycle of homelessness and providing a quality education to homeless students. Other implications include making sure that families are aware of and have access to the programs available to them. It is also critical that the public is educated concerning the demographic makeup of homeless families as well as their special needs so that policy changes will be supported by the public. The implications for the homeless are better chances in life when they know and apply better choices for their lives.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research opportunities abound for this subject. This research focused on understanding the lived experiences of five service providers to the homeless who were not

part of the educational system. Another study might focus on those who are in education: administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, school nurses, counselors, secretaries, cafeteria personnel, bus drivers, and all others who come into contact with homeless students. This study might look at the lived experience of educators of homeless students and the challenges they endure. Classroom observations as well as interviews might be conducted to see the interactions between homeless students and those who are charged with educating them.

Similarly, those who work most closely with homeless families like residential supervisors, counselors, and other shelter staff could be surveyed to gain an understanding of their lived experiences and perspectives on how best to serve the homeless. These workers would have different insights than the child psychologist, clinical director, and executive director from the shelter I interviewed.

Another potential study might include a qualitative, phenomenological one of the homeless families themselves. A researcher could work with shelters, social service agencies, or schools to find participants willing to discuss the challenges involved in being homeless. This might be a rich study full of potential to enable others to better understand the causes and results of family homelessness.

A study of homeless students would also make for important research. Research of this magnitude would need to be conducted under the close scrutiny of an Institutional Review Board to ensure that the rights of these minors would be protected. However, obtaining an understanding of the perspective of these young people would be invaluable. This understanding might lead to the policy changes, additional funding, and improved structural mandates the experts in this field are advocating for.

## **Final Thoughts**

Conducting this research study has changed some of my perspectives of homeless families. I, too, was guilty of stereotyping the homeless in negative ways. Now I know that sometimes the chances afforded to the many are not always afforded to the few. My hope is that others who read this study will find that their perspectives have also changed and that they will advocate for services for the homeless.

This study is significant in that educators across the country may benefit in knowing how best to serve their homeless student population, how best to identify students who are homeless, how to ensure that federal mandates such as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act are employed, and how best to educate parents of their rights pertaining to their children's educations. This study could be instrumental in establishing best practices in making educators, parents, and students aware of how best to provide services to this marginalized section of our student population. The study may also raise awareness of what homelessness is and how to break the cycles that enable it to continue. Additionally, the study may add to existing research by updating statistics and definitions regarding homeless education. My hope is that the information in this study may influence educational policy decisions on local, state, and national levels as well as provide support for those who serve the homeless.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board

Date: Tuesday, September 15, 2009  
IRB Application No ED09119  
Proposal Title: Challenges Facing Service Providers in Educating Homeless Students

Reviewed and Processed as: Exempt

**Status Recommended by Reviewer(s): Approved Protocol Expires: 9/14/2010**

Principal Investigator(s):

Pamela Beck	Pamela Brown
2403 SW Morningside Dr.	237 Willard
Blue Springs, MO 64015	Stillwater, OK 74078

The IRB application referenced above has been approved. It is the judgment of the reviewers that the rights and welfare of individuals who may be asked to participate in this study will be respected, and that the research will be conducted in a manner consistent with the IRB requirements as outlined in section 45 CFR 46.

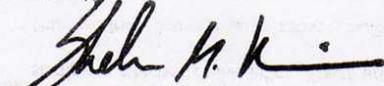
The final versions of any printed recruitment, consent and assent documents bearing the IRB approval stamp are attached to this letter. These are the versions that must be used during the study.

As Principal Investigator, it is your responsibility to do the following:

1. Conduct this study exactly as it has been approved. Any modifications to the research protocol must be submitted with the appropriate signatures for IRB approval.
2. Submit a request for continuation if the study extends beyond the approval period of one calendar year. This continuation must receive IRB review and approval before the research can continue.
3. Report any adverse events to the IRB Chair promptly. Adverse events are those which are unanticipated and impact the subjects during the course of this research; and
4. Notify the IRB office in writing when your research project is complete.

Please note that approved protocols are subject to monitoring by the IRB and that the IRB office has the authority to inspect research records associated with this protocol at any time. If you have questions about the IRB procedures or need any assistance from the Board, please contact Beth McTernan in 219 Cordell North (phone: 405-744-5700, beth.mcternan@okstate.edu).

Sincerely,



Sheila Kennison, Chair  
Institutional Review Board

## Appendix B

### Interview Questions for Pamela A. Beck's Research titled Challenges Facing Service Providers in Educating Homeless Students

*\*Interview questions were similar to those listed below. Interviews were semi-structured, however, allowing for changes in the order of questions, the deletion of questions, and the addition of probing questions related to the original question.*

1. Tell me about what brought you to this work.
2. How do you work either directly or indirectly with homeless students and their families?
3. What specific services do you provide?
4. What do you like about your job?
5. Describe a typical day.
6. What are the challenges of your job?
7. What kinds of relationships do you form with homeless families and their school-aged children?
8. What are the gaps in working with this population?
9. How do you work with other providers of services to this population?
10. How do providers work with each other to weave a web of care for homeless students and their families?
11. What are your existing contributions to this web of care?
12. What do you hope to contribute in the future?

13. What do you think teachers, administrators, and other school personnel should know to best serve this population?
14. Are there specific documents that address the homeless student population that educators need to be aware of?
15. What do you think is essential for teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to know about the McKinney/Vento Homeless Assistance Act?
16. Can you tell me a story about an educator working with a particular homeless student?
17. How should the families of homeless students be informed of their rights?
18. Do other laws or mandates exist that apply to homeless students?
19. Are there other questions I should be asking or other areas I should be focusing on concerning how to best educate homeless students?
20. What else would you like to tell me about the education of homeless students?

## VITA

Pamela Ann Beck

Candidate for the Degree of

Master of Science

Thesis: CHALLENGES FACING SERVICE PROVIDERS IN EDUCATING HOMELESS STUDENTS

Major Field: Education/Curriculum and Leadership Studies

### Biographical:

Personal Data: Born in Lawton, Oklahoma, on March 22, 1961.

Education: Graduated from Cyril High School, Cyril, Oklahoma, in May 1979; received a Bachelor of Science in Teaching Secondary Language Arts in December 1993 from Phillips University, Enid, Oklahoma. Completed the requirements for the Master of Science in Education/Teaching Learning and Leadership/Curriculum and Leadership Studies at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma, in December 2009.

### Experience:

August 2008- May 2009	<b>Oklahoma State University.</b> Graduate Assistant. Worked for Dr. Christine Ormsbee and Dr. Pamela Brown in the college of education.
August 2003- June 2008	<b>Chisholm High School.</b> Freshman and Sophomore English including Pre-AP English II. Quiz Bowl and Scholastic Coach.
August 2002- May 2003	<b>Enid Public Schools.</b> Longfellow Junior High, Eighth Grade English.
August 2001- May 2002	<b>Oklahoma Bible Academy.</b> Junior High English, Speech/Drama/Debate
August 1994- May 2001	<b>Waukomis High School.</b> Ninth through Twelfth English.

Professional Memberships: National Education Association; National Council of Teachers of English

Name: Pamela Ann Beck

Date of Degree: December, 2009

Institution: Oklahoma State University

Location: Stillwater, Oklahoma

Title of Study: CHALLENGES FACING SERVICE PROVIDERS IN EDUCATING  
HOMELESS STUDENTS

Pages in Study: 75

Candidate for the Degree of Master of Science

Major Field: Curriculum and Leadership Studies

Scope and Method of Study: This study was a qualitative, phenomenological inquiry into challenges experienced by service providers in educating homeless children. This study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with five service providers for homeless families in the United States. The goal of this study was to understand how service providers support homeless students and their families as well as the challenges these service providers experience and what they perceive that teachers of homeless students should know about educating homeless students.

Findings and Conclusions: This study found that many structural, economic, and interpersonal barriers exist in working with the homeless. The categories of barriers for the homeless, common characteristics in the homeless, and the role of the educational system were discussed as important to the study. The themes that emerged were ones of the persistence of poverty and homelessness, perceptions of the homeless, the trauma-informed approach, and the lack of time. These categories and themes best represent the experiences of the participants in the study. The implications of this study include the implementation of programs to make more caregivers including teachers aware of the challenges and mandates that apply to homeless students and policies to make the homeless more aware of the services available to them.

ADVISER'S APPROVAL: Dr. Pamela U. Brown

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