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Mothers experiencing homelessness : an exploratory study on parental involvement in children's education and perceived barriers to involvement :

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory study examines the experience of mothers that are homeless with school-age children. The primary research questions were: What is the level of parental involvement of homeless mothers in their children's education? What are the perceived barriers to their involvement? The study was conducted using semi-structured open-ended interviews of eight women that were homeless with at least one school-age child.

Study results indicated that level of parental involvement varied depending on the specific temporary living situation of the participant, in addition to her demographics and history of homelessness. Parental involvement was low not due to perceived stigma but mainly due to lack of time and resources. The study sheds light on various housing resources, such as transitional housing and homeless shelters, and points out that transitional housing programs could be more beneficial to children's educations if they allowed the mother more time for involvement and provided more academic resources for the child. In addition, the main challenges of living in a shelter are discussed, such as lack of space to do homework and barriers to adequate sleep.

MOTHERS EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON

PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN CHILDREN'S EDUCATION AND PERCEIVED

BARRIERS TO INVOLVEMENT

A project based upon an independent investigation,
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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Homelessness is increasing in the United States.   In the 2010 school year, the number of

homeless families reached an all-time high, and more than 1.6 million children (1 in 45) are

homeless each year in the United States (Bassuk and Beardslee, 2014).   I spent this past year as

a school social work intern for an elementary and middle school in the Bay Area of California.

I would often meet students, or have staff tell me about students, whose families were homeless

and living in either shelters, motels, or with multiple relatives.   I found myself wondering what

this experience was like for the student: How did they get to and from school?   What did they

do after school every day?   Were they able to do homework and participate in other school

activities?   I also noticed how this issue could have been so easily overlooked, as each student's

situation was invisible to me until it was reported by others.   That the majority of homeless

families have young children and are headed by a single parent mother is a significant fact to be

taken into account when attempting to address the needs of families experiencing homelessness

(Swick and Williams, 2010).   As reported by the National Coalition for the Homeless (2015),

"Homelessness is a devastating experience for families."   I found myself increasingly wanting

to know more about this experience, especially in the context of the school setting in which I was

working.

There is an abundance of studies that examine aspects of homelessness ranging from

mental health status of the homeless (Chambers, et al, 2014), factors that precipitate

homelessness (Buckner, 2014), adverse effects of homelessness particularly on children (Dennis,

2010); (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010); (Swick, 1008), and interventions that are mainly focused

on obtaining housing.   However, there is an enormous gap in information on interventions targeted to support homeless mothers in navigating both homelessness and parenting, and on interventions to remedy the adverse effects of homelessness on youth, particularly in the domain of education.   There is also a lack of information that is current.   I feel that it is extremely important to hear about the experiences of this population from their own point of view, in their own words, in their own context; and from the view of homeless women and mothers in particular (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012).   As Elliot Liebow says in his book <u>Tell Them Who I Am</u>, "I do not mean that a man with a home and family can see and feel the world as homeless women see and feel it. I do mean, however, that it is reasonable and useful to try to do so. Trying to put oneself in the place of the others lies at the heart of the social contract and of social life itself" (p. xv).

My qualitative exploratory study seeks to answer the following questions: What is the level of parental involvement by homeless mothers in their children's schools and educations, and what are their perceived barriers to involvement?   The fact that parental involvement in school is proven to be a positive influence on student's academic achievement (DeLoatche et al, 2014), combined with the fact that the adverse life experience faced by many homeless mothers may prevent them from such involvement are both underlying assumptions of my research. This reality may impact on their children's academic achievement.

My study is relevant to clinical social work practice and policy because it will seek to identify challenges that need to be addressed within the population of homeless mothers, and ultimately lead to the exploration of interventions to combat the low academic achievement of many homeless youth.   In addition, by understanding how homeless mothers feel they are perceived by the school community, my study can work toward guidelines for the providing of

culturally competent care and service to this population.   I feel that while we may lack the ability to provide many of the material resources needed by people experiencing homelessness, the frequent focus of many studies on issues of obtaining housing overlooks the issue of navigating homelessness itself.   I will seek to fill in that gap in between homelessness and housing, by addressing how to intervene *during* homelessness rather than attempting to remedy it by solely seeking to provide housing, and education is one of the most important interventions in today's world.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The following literature review will address content ranging from the needs, challenges, experiences, and demographics of mothers experiencing homelessness, to risk factors and implications for children that are homeless, to the importance of parental involvement in children's education, as well as a highlight of the gaps in the literature that my study proposes to fill.

Mothers Experiencing Homelessness

A. Unmet needs and challenges: Their own perspectives

The fact that there is a growing number of homeless families headed by single parent mothers is of no doubt and is a fact present in the literature: "The majority of homeless families have very young children and are parented by a single mother" (Swick and Williams, 2010, p.49). However, as pointed out by Swick and Williams (2010), Sznadjer-Murray and Slesnick (2011), and Milligan (2013), most of the research focuses on factors that precipitate family homelessness and/or on housing issues. Milligan (2013) explains, "The majority of prior research regarding homeless mothers is quantitative by design and focus primarily on the demographics and characteristics of shelter conditions" (p. 3). There is a lack of information that includes the perspectives of these homeless women themselves on their experience and unmet needs, and I have explored a few studies that have attempted to gather this information, all of which use semi-structured interviews at homeless shelters (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012); (Sznajder-Murray and Slenick, 2011); (Swick and Reginald, 2010).

In their qualitative study, Dworsky and Meehan (2012) conduct interviews at a homeless

shelter for young mothers with the goal of finding out more about what it is like and means for them to be a parent, and of the challenges they face. Their study is important and relevant because in order to adequately address the needs of homeless adolescent mothers, we need a better understanding of the population (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012). The authors interviewed 27 women between the ages of 16 to 20 years old who were either current or former residents of a shelter in Chicago, and covered a range of questions about parenting.

I appreciate the sample size of the study, and the fact that 26 out of 27 participants were African American and so an African American female conducted the interviews. The authors recognize the potential limitation that their sample is non-random and took place at only one shelter. However, I feel that since there is so little research done on this population, that anything is a good start. Semi-structured interviews allowed for the unique nature of each individual's story to be presented. Two questions they asked that I particularly like are: How do the women define their parenting responsibilities, and how did they learn to parent. I feel these are important questions to be asking in order to understand their point of view and the foundation of parenting that these mothers are coming from (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012).

The most salient findings are in the challenges the women describe: Lack of maternal role models growing up, stress, still trying to finish school themselves, and no help from the child's fathers (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012). In addition to their interviews, Dworsky and Meehan's exploration of the literature provides a backdrop of information in which homeless mother's struggles are reported to include "needing but not always receiving support to help cope with the stress of juggling multiple roles," and "visions of a better future" (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012, p. 2120). The concluding question is: Why are they not receiving the support they need? The authors suppose that shelters and other services for homeless "may not be adequately prepared to

address the unique needs of pregnant and parenting youth" (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012, p. 2120).   Though this study focuses specifically on young mothers (between ages 16 - 20), I hypothesize that needs are similarly unmet among homeless mothers of older age groups.

Sznajder-Murray and Slenick (2011) did a study that I feel complements and furthers that of the Dworsky and Meehan (2012) study.   They examine homeless mother's perceptions of service providers, a knowledge that could perhaps contribute to better interventions for the unmet needs of the population.   Their study focuses on homeless mothers with substance abuse and explores via interviews the factors that influence their decision to stay in or leave treatment. The authors cite previous research that suggests the following as treatment barriers women might face: Cost, concern about what others think, child care, and distrust of authority figures and/or service providers (Sznadjer-Murray and Slenick, 2011).   Though their study only focuses on substance abuse programs, I feel it is relevant to my research question as well because perception of service providers is relevant in any domain of service, including schools, and barriers might be similar across settings.

The study included 28 women, currently residing in the homeless shelter, with physical custody of at least one biological child, and with a substance abuse or alcohol use issue.   I appreciate the sample with a large age range of 18-40 years old, and the somewhat more diverse participants of both African American and Caucasian women.   I also feel it is a strength that the women were interviewed in focus groups in a private room and by people that were not members of shelter staff.   The four topics areas they covered with their interview questions seem relevant for their research goal: Questions about current basic needs, prior experience with systems of care, the type of assistance they want, and interpersonal issues.   Like Dworsky and Meehan's study (2012), semi-structured interview questions allow for the women to decide what

information is most important rather than letting the interviewer decide (Sznadjer-Murray and Slenick, 2011).

They found that the women reported negative experiences related to the topics of understanding, support, and fear, in interactions with program staff.   The women expressed three main areas of what they hoped for: To be understood, to receive positive support, and the need to trust service providers (Sznadjer-Murray and Slenick, 2011).   In order to increase their engagement in treatment, then, requires them to either be treated better, or perceive better treatment, by staff.   The authors' literature review demonstrates that previous studies have highlighted the fact that positive relations with staff result in better outcomes for a program. Their literature review, methods, and findings, however, did not focus in depth on the fact that these women are mothers, beyond stating that they had children and covering some basic parenting questions.   I feel perhaps there is more room to explore how the women perceive service providers specifically in conjunction with the knowledge that they are homeless *and* mothers.

Swick and Reginald's (2010) study looks specifically at implications for early childhood professionals based on the perspectives of single parent homeless mothers and their "distinct ideas about how to resolve their situations" (Swick and Reginald, 2010, p. 50).   The authors point out that this population faces a complexity of stressors, including violence and poverty, and policymakers "do not really understand the root causes of their homelessness" (Swick and Reginald, 2010, p. 50).   The lack of understanding of policymakers again emphasizes the need for us to hear more from these women directly.

The study also uses a qualitative approach with interviews to hone in on the unique perspectives of the sample.   The study sample is very small, with only four participants, but I

think it is a strength that each participant was residing at a different shelter. As explained by the authors, open-ended questions "encouraged them to talk about their parenting approach and to describe their relationship with their children" (Swick and Reginald, 2010, p. 52). I find it very interesting and useful that the author's also interviewed the directors at each shelter to see how their responses matched up with those of the women. I appreciate this because my concern as to a potential bias in studies like this and for my own study is that, as human beings, we all may misjudge how others view or treat us.

The results from this study that I find most salient are the women's own answers about what they feel their major challenges are, and what they feel would be most helpful in overcoming them. Their major barriers were reported as lack of finances and loss of control, and their main recommendations to treatment providers were as follows: Involve faith-based groups in the support they provide, eliminate negative stereotypes, increase interactions with homeless mothers in supportive ways, such as through mentoring and counseling, and ultimately, work toward understanding the problems these women face (Swick and Reginald, 2010).

B. Parenting while homeless

Both homelessness and parenting present their own set of challenges. Swick (2008) is part of a study that looks at the combination of the two: Parenting within the context of homelessness. The study of the literature explores some effects homelessness has on parenting, and seeks to identify ways to empower parents in positions of homelessness and help them develop positive parenting skills (Swick, 2008).

Swick first introduces the issue that is his research focus by explaining, "Homeless parents of young children find themselves facing many stressors that negatively impede their functioning in personal and parental roles" (Swick, 2008, p. 328). Swick provides an in-depth

overview of the following stressors that may impact their ability to parent effectively: The perceptions others have of them as parents, criticism and judgment, loss of private space, loss of control, violence and abuse, isolation from social supports, and chronic poverty. In addition, in their own personal lives, many parents facing homelessness have limitations such as a lack of parental role models, low self-esteem, and lack of education and life skills (Swick, 2008). Swick explains, "For many parents who are homeless their lack of understanding of child development confounds this situation" (Swick, 2008, p. 328).

Though this study explores issues of parenting in general and my research question is specifically about mothers, I feel this study is helpful in providing me with context about issues faced during homelessness. I find it especially relevant to my study that Swick (2008) points out that of the stressors mentioned, one of the most significant ones in terms of its impact on parental functioning is the perceptions of others. Homeless parents report that they are perceived as ineffective parents, that family and friends support them less because they are homeless, and that overall they are treated negatively (Swick, 2008). There are many negative stereotypes held about this population, such as that they are lazy and/or that they are bad parents. My study would go on to ask if these perceptions are felt to be present in the school setting. Swick (2008) points out, as well, that "this is an issue that seems to impact parents from all cultures" (p. 327).

When looking at life in a shelter in particular, there are many factors that negatively impact the parenting of a child. Many shelters have strict schedules that have to be followed, which takes away the parent's ability to set bed times, meal times, play times. Also, there is a loss of private space for the parent and child and for any family rituals. The public nature of the situation is an added stressor for parenting, especially if the parent has low self-esteem to begin

with. Swick (2008) highlights some suggestions as to how homeless parents can strengthen parent-child bonds and navigate these stressors with the help of professionals; stressing that support is essential. Ultimately, "homeless mothers indicate low threat, high support contexts provide them with the needed processes for empowering their families" (Swick, 2008, p. 330).

Many of the interventions for people experiencing homelessness target the issue of obtaining housing and connecting people to resources. According to Bassuk and Beardslee (2014), "Family oriented services and parenting supports are infrequently provided" (p. 74). As Bassuk and Beardslee (2014) point out in their literature review, many homeless mothers are also a population with high rates of depressive disorders. Children living with a depressed parent have higher rates of poor medical, mental health, and educational outcomes (Bassuk and Beardslee, 2014); and mothers with depression who were homeless displayed "more limited parenting skills," "lacked understanding of child development," "provided inadequate structure," and were "less likely to provide learning stimuli" and establish routines (Bassuk and Beardslee, 2014, p. 75). The combination of a mother's depression and interruptions in family routines at shelters contribute to the limiting of parenting skills. For my study I am lead to consider the question of whether or not depression corresponds with a perception of negative treatment from others.

Bassuk and Beardslee's (2014) articles is also one of the few I found that talk in depth about issues of race. In terms of service usage patterns, low income African American women "had a deep distrust of the health care system as a white system" (Bassuk and Beardslee, 2014, p. 75). Since no institution, including schools, is free of racism, I hypothesize that my study will also see evidence of perceived discrimination experienced by homeless mothers of various races.

Swick and Reginald (2010) begin to point out some of the implications for the

parent-child relationship that stem from a mothers' homelessness. They point out that "parenting is key to children's early development and learning", and that many of these mothers are at risk economically, socially, emotionally and educationally. In addition, "low literacy functioning is also a key factor in the lives of many of these homeless mothers" (Swick and Reginald, 2010, p. 49). Their literature review also points out that homelessness for children contributes to negative influences on development and learning, on cognitive and literacy development, and to malnutrition (Swick and Reginald, 2010). The combination of a mother's lack of education with the negative impact of homelessness on the child's education works to create a large obstacle for this population.

Implications for Children of Homeless Mothers

A. General Implications

To gain some context on the overall understood implications homelessness has on children, I looked at a phenomenological study on homelessness effects on mental and behavioral health of children (Dennis, 2010). The author provides data from the literature to show that homelessness results in both physical and mental health issues for children, such as anemia, dental decay, anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems (Dennis, 2010, p. 2). In the study, Dennis seeks to gain more of an understanding of the specific effects homelessness has on children by asking parents, guardians, and shelter staff what effects they perceive. The author elaborates on the importance of obtaining the viewpoints of people in these different roles by explaining that "because parents or guardians and shelter personnel may hold valuable insights into the mental and behavioral health of homeless children, an understanding of their perceptions is needed to develop relevant and effective intervention strategies for homeless children's mental and behavioral problems (Dennis, 2010, p. 4).

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I appreciate this study as it is another one that offers a first-hand perspective from people that are actually experiencing the issue being researched where "every family's experience of being homeless is unique" (Dennis, 2010, p. 8). Though the study had a small sample size of ten people and was limited to one shelter location and is thus not generalizable, the author did confirm that children are a population that experience adverse effects as a result of homelessness. The children in this study were reported to exhibit untreated depression, anxiety, withdrawal from others, academic problems, and low self-esteem (Dennis, 2010). More research needs to be done on both specific effects of and interventions in the lives of homeless children.

B. Educational Related Implications

Perlman and Fantuzzo (2010) conduct a study in which they look at the connection between adverse experiences and homelessness for children and the children's academic achievement through time. They state,

> A small number of research articles have examined the educational well-being of children with a history of homelessness. Similar to children with a history of child maltreatment, children with a history of homelessness have been found to be at increased risk for poor academic achievement relative to their peers. (p. 6).

Using a framework of developmental epidemiology, the authors seek to determine if the timing of adverse experiences in children's lives effects the extent of impact on education, in addition to looking at what specific aspects of education are effected.

As a result of the rising awareness of life circumstances interfering negatively on children's education, a legislation known as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act was created in the late nineties. Essentially, the goal of the act is to ensure that homeless children are accessing the public schools and any other interventions or education services they need

(Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010). However, the issue of poor academic outcomes remains, and the related literature is limited "by inadequate attention to the context of child development" (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010, p. 7). For example, many studies that look at effects of homelessness on academic achievement of children do not take into account age groups and developmental stages and instead group them all together as youth. The authors of this study sought to fill that gap (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010).

Some specific academic implications of homelessness are: Learning disabilities, below average intelligence, poor performance on standardized assessments, poor mathematics, reading, and language outcomes, and decreased academic engagement (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010). The authors choose to view the issue through a developmental epidemiology framework because it is one that will consider "the wide-ranging influence of familial risk factors on children's academic achievement" (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010, p. 7). The framework calls for a focus on the timing of life events, as well as on the importance of a stable environment and nurturing relationship for a child's development. In the case of homelessness, such nurturing relationships may be disrupted, interfering with "cognitive, physical, and emotional well-being" (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010, p. 6).

For example, according to developmental theories, children need to develop a secure relationship with a caregiver as a base from which to go out and explore the world from. The setting of a shelter may disrupt this by interrupting the forming of a nurturing relationship, and/or by not having enough space or toys for the child to explore with. The child is "restricted in exploration of the world around them" (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010, p. 23). In later years when the child enters school, a lack of independence and interest in their environment may play out. In addition, shelters may not have age appropriate books or other "literacy-related

activities" (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010, p. 24) to prepare the child with language and reading skills for school.

For their study, the authors used a large sample size of 12,045 children all in the same age group of second grade, included both males and females, and children of various races. The authors looked at attendance data, academic achievement data, housing and child welfare records, and other data from public surveillance systems from over time, and used statistical analyses to look for connections and find answers to their question. In terms of homelessness, the authors found that homelessness experienced during the two youngest developmental stages had the greatest impact on their educational performance in later years. The authors suggest that a collaboration between social services and education professionals is needed for intervention (Perlman and Fantuzzo, 2010). In addition, I feel that my study will contribute to the research by emphasizing the need for parent collaboration, as well.

I find this study important because it suggests a need to understand homeless children's academic performance in relation to their current developmental stage and the developmental stage at which they became homeless. With more knowledge of the specific effects and outcomes of homelessness on certain age groups, we can work toward developing more effective interventions for children. In terms of my focus on homeless mothers, this information can also be used to educate mothers on the developmental expectations and implications for their children, and perhaps ultimately lead to advocacy for appropriate placement of these children in schools. My only critique of this study is that the authors seemed to at times almost suggest, perhaps unintentionally, that homelessness is connected to/is a form of maltreatment, which is not true. Sharper clarification of the fact that homelessness and maltreatment are being studied together here because they are both adverse experiences and not necessarily connected could be

useful in reducing stigmas around homelessness.

C. Interventions for Children

There are a number of studies in the literature that highlight both the risk and protective factors in the lives of children of homeless mothers, but only a small number that look for potential interventions. In their study, Hone and Piescher (2012) look at the role of supportive housing on homeless children's well being. Using a longitudinal study method, the authors seek to learn more about the effectiveness of supportive housing as an intervention in support of better educational outcomes. Their study is unique in that not many studies that look at homelessness and child well-being look at how the child's well-being (in this case educational well-being) is effected *over time* (Hone and Piescher, 2012).

The supportive housing model is one in which families receive housing along with services such as case management, job and life skills training, and alcohol and substance abuse programs, with the overall goal of reaching housing stability (Hone and Piescher, 2012). The authors of the study point out that ethnic minority groups are at the greatest risk for homelessness, and that homelessness and its effects on children are not the same across all communities. In Minnesota, where this study takes place, the majority of homeless are African American and American Indian. For this study, homeless student is defined as it is stated in the McKinney Vento Act by the U.S. Department of Education: "A student who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence or shares the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason" (Hone and Piescher, 2012, p. 1442). The educational components that the study focuses on are school mobility, attendance rates, academic achievement, and rates of Individualized Education Plans (IEP's).

Hone and Piescher's study is similar to Perlman and Fantuzzo's (2010) in that they also

looked at public records such as housing, human services departments, and education related records to collect their data on students.   The sample size was large, and statistical methods were used to analyze the longitudinal data over a three year period.   To make it a stronger study, a comparison group was included that consisted of homeless children not in supportive housing.

The results of this study were interesting in that not all educational components measured were effected equally by supportive housing.   As would be expected, supportive housing did result in less school mobility and higher attendance rates, along with higher rates of IEP's.   The authors explain that higher rates of IEP's could be taking place as a result of students being at school enough for the teacher to identify areas where they need assistance.   Academic achievement such as test scores, though, did not consistently improve, suggesting that supportive housing services need to incorporate academic resources such as tutoring into its services.

Similary to Perlman and Fantuzzo's (2010) study, the implications of this one also call for collaboration between agencies and schools.   I find this study useful in thinking about interventions for homeless students.   However, there was no mention of the impact of race or ethnicity in the discussion.   Since the authors opened up this dialogue in the introduction to their study, I would have liked to seen more consideration of these issues as they may have impacted on the results.   The majority of studies I've read on adverse effects of homeless in fact do not include any in-depth consideration of race.

In their study, Masten et al. (2008) seek to uncover protective factors for academic achievement in homeless, or highly mobile, children (Masten et al., 2008), with the goal of developing interventions to enhance academic performance.   They sought out families at a shelter with school-aged children, assessed the executive functions and cortisol levels of 5 to 7

year olds, measured parenting quality based on factors of warmth, involvement with children, and providing of structure to their children, and finally, they surveyed teachers to assess the academic performance, health and behavior at school of the students (Masten et al., 2008). What I appreciate about their study is that it is one of the few studies with a focus on school children that researches beyond just compiling data from schools.   However, their results were not surprising: Lower attendance rates result in lower academic achievements, and children at higher risk of poor academic performance are those with a single parent with low education level and under age 18 (Masten et al., 2008).   In addition, parenting quality is directly proportional to school outcomes.   Masten et al. (2008) are able to conclude that "parenting skills are an appealing possibility for intervention" (Masten et al., 2008).   My study would seek to address exactly that- a very specific aspect of parenting skill.

Despite the implications of the findings of the above study, some of the authors went on a few years later to conduct a similar study that still did not address parenting skills as an intervention (Masten et al., 2012).   Rather, they assessed 138 children living in shelters for homeless families with the goal of examining the importance of executive function skills as related to academic success.   They define executive functions as "a broad set of cognitive processes that enable individuals to manage and direct their attention, thinking, and actions to meet adaptive goals" (Masten et al., 2012, p. 376).   The implication and rationale for their study is that these functions are malleable and develop and change with age and experience and can be a protective factor.   However, their conclusion does not seem to shed any new light on the topic.   Further research needs to address developmental processes and interventions that contribute to strengthening these executive functions.   Again I feel it will be more productive to then expand this by honing in on a particular parenting skill as a developmental intervention.

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Also, a number of these studies keep their focus on the children of the homeless mothers, while

needs for interventions with the mothers themselves remain unmet.

Milligan (2013) set out to do a study that is very close to my own research question.

Similarly aware of the lack of focus in literature on topics beyond general conditions of

homelessness, Milligan wanted to research how being homeless impacted a mother's ability to

advocate for her children within the United States education system.   However, through the use

of interviews with open-ended questions, the women's responses directed her to instead focus

more broadly on how homeless mothers "understand and make meaning" of their experience

(Milligan, 2013); ultimately, to allow "marginalized voices traditionally silenced or distorted to

be heard within a current social and historical context" (Milligan, 2013).   Within that, she

included questions about education.

I like this study because the researcher is very thorough in examining her own position

and potential bias as a researcher.   She herself was once homeless.   She points out, though,

that as a Caucasian woman who grew up middle-class, her experience may still be very different

from those of homeless people of color.   Her sample size of ten women was as diverse as

possible, including women that are Hispanic, African American, Caucasian, and Laotian.   She

planned to do two separate interviews with each woman, but found that it was challenging

enough for the women to balance all of their needs and even commit to one interview.   All of

the mothers were currently or formerly homeless, and clients of the same social service agency in

Seattle (Milligan, 2013).

In order to incorporate some questions about education, Milligan (2013) asked the

women to provide examples of if and how they have advocated for their child at school.   The

responses ranged from stories of some mother's feeling like their children's needs weren't being

met at school, to calling teachers about a child being bullied, to not being called back by teachers, to kids being embarrassed to tell people at school about their situation (Milligan, 2013). While many of the responses clearly demonstrated some of the difficulty navigating schools while homeless, there are a few responses where I can't help but wonder and also consider that perhaps maybe it was an irresponsible teacher that didn't call back, etc.; there was no consideration of alternative explanations for what happened. However, the point of the interview was to hear the women's perspective of what is true for them.

Another question the researcher asked the mothers is what they would want educators to know about their situation. These responses revealed how deeply the negative stigma and stereotypes about homelessness are felt in the lives of these women; most of them responded that they would simply tell educators to get rid of assumptions and negative stereotypes about both them and their children (Milligan, 2013). Many of them reported low self-esteem and self worth. In addition, some unique responses in this study were the desire to tell educators that it is hard to always receive adequate nutrition, that their kids want to be in school and have friends but it is hard for them to be emotionally present, and that it is hard to make plans because of inconsistency (Milligan, 2013). Also, that sometimes there is no time for a child to do homework after having to wait in line for a shelter for the night or for dinner. Like many of the studies I have reviewed here, one important suggestion that is an implication of the study is once again to have social service agencies and schools collaborate more so that everyone is aware of what is going on in the children's lives (Milligan, 2013).

The importance of parental involvement in children's schools and education

Bronfenbrenner's ecological system's theory highlights the influence that environmental interactions have on a child's development (DeLoatche et al., 2014). In their article, DeLoatche

et al. point out that parent involvement in children's education starting in preschool is an interaction that positively effects the development of literacy skills, mathematical skills, social skills, and positive attitudes toward school (DeLoatche et al., 2014).   Parent involvement is defined as learning activities that parents engage in at home and school, and communication that occurs between parents and school personnel.   The authors also point out that factors such as socio-economic status and other demographics are predictors of parental involvement; for example, fewer resources means less involvement (DeLoatche et al., 2014).   What I want to know is *why* and *how* these demographic factors are predictors of parental involvement.   The authors hypothesize that "it is possible that parents who are new to the education system may not be aware of the importance of parental involvement or how to become involved in their children's education" (DeLoatche, et al., 2014).   In addition, in her article, Bowman (2013) points out that "many communities and school districts are unaware that homelessness exists in their localities" (Bowman, 2013).

In their study, Want and Sheikh-Khalil (2014) point out that the amount and type of parental involvement in schools varies across different ethnicities.   In addition, they note that "several studies have suggested that lower income parents tend to be less involved in their children's education," most likely due to less time and resources, but perhaps also because of fear of judgment and stigma (Want and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).   Most research on parental involvement has been done with middle-class, European Americans, which has created a biased expectation for family-school relations.   The authors performed a longitudinal study to look at the nature of parental involvement and how it effects student achievement outcomes for high schoolers.

The study included a large and diverse sample of families from ten different public high

schools.   Their research was performed with mixed methods of surveys, interviews, and data

collection from school records.   They assessed the following components of parental

involvement: School-based, home-based, and academic socialization.   Academic socialization

is defined as   "the communication of parental expectations about schoolwork and the

importance of education, encouragement of educational and career goals, and making

plans with them to support their future goals" (Want and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).   They

viewed their research from a frame work of self-system theory, "a motivational framework

grounded in self-determination theory… used to understand how the home and school

environments interact to influence adolescent academic and emotional functioning" (Want

and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

The authors found that among types of parental involvement, academic socialization was

one of the most important.   They also found that African American families were more likely to

be involved in education from home, whereas European Americans from school; and both

methods of involvement were equally effective (Want and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).   The authors

suggest that schools provide more education to parents about how to be involved in their child's

school, such as college fair and entrance exam information and other resources that support

academic socialization (Want and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).   I feel it also shows that it is important

to be aware that a family may view parental involvement according to the views of their cultural

background, and we cannot place the practices of certain cultures or races above others.   Also,

we cannot assume that a parent does not care if they are not involved the traditional, expected

ways.

Treatment Implications and Justification for Study

The literature I've reviewed has demonstrated that as a fact homelessness remains a rising

concern, especially with the recent economic and housing crisis in the United States (Masten et al., 2012).   However, with the majority of studies and literature reviews repeated focus on the adverse impacts of homelessness, I am left wondering where the solution and interventions will come from.   Without continuing to seek a clear understanding of the challenges faced by homeless mothers from *their own* point of view, we will not be able to create effective interventions to help them navigate both homelessness and child rearing.   I find it significant that almost every article I reviewed states and explains that homelessness results in poor academic achievement for children; for, there is no doubt of the importance of education in today's world.   Thus, my study proposes to fill the gap: The search for the intervention that will *address* this specific relationship of homelessness and educational achievement, with a focus on the involvement of the people that impact children's lives the most- their mothers.   In addition, my general search for articles about parental involvement in children's schools yielded a number of results of studies regarding involvement with immigrant parents and of same sex couples parents in schools, but none of homeless mothers.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Research Purpose and Question

The purpose of this study is to gain information that can eventually lead to the development of ways to help homeless youth succeed in school by identifying obstacles that may prevent homeless mother's from being involved in their children's education. Parental involvement in a child's education is shown to be effective in promoting academic success, and I assume that with the eventual removal of these obstacles, homeless youth will have better educational outcomes (Want and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014). Specifically, my research seeks to answer the following questions: What is the level of parental involvement of homeless mothers in their children's educations, and what are the perceived barriers to their involvement? I hope to have obtained information that could lead to education of school personnel on how to involve this population in the school community and how to appropriately educate these mothers about the importance of their involvement in their child's schooling, especially since according to the literature, many members of this population in all likelihood did not have parents that were involved in their own education (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012).

Research Methods & Design

This qualitative exploratory study was conducted via in-person interviews so that I could obtain information from the point of view of the women themselves. Interviews were semi-structured to allow the women's personal narratives to be revealed. Since I have not found

a study that has been conducted to elicit the specific information I am seeking, my study is exploratory in nature.   I believe a qualitative study allowed for an in-depth exploration of how these women, from their own point of view, experience their children's school, and enabled me to tailor my interviews to each participant and explore reasons as to why the women may or may not be involved in the school.   In addition, an in person interview avoided the limitations of fixed questions such as yes or no questions without room for stating examples.

The limitation to my research design to keep in mind is that I did not collect any empirical data and thus my results cannot be statistically analyzed and tested for validity and generalized to other urban and/or rural settings.

Homelessness is defined as people that do not currently have a permanent residence, are living in transitional housing, are living in homeless shelters, or have experienced this situation sometime within the last ten years.   Homelessness must have occurred for at least a few months in order to take part in this study.

Sample

Participation in this study was completely voluntary.   Participants fit the following demographic criteria: They must be women, currently experiencing homelessness or were homeless within the past ten years, must be or have been homeless for at least three months, must have at least one biological child in their custody that is or has been homeless with them, the child must be or have been enrolled in a k-12 school during the time of homelessness.   I hoped to obtain a diverse sample in terms of race and age.   However, participants had to be able to speak English since that is the only language I speak.   Language is a barrier which can influence parent school involvement.   While that is a significant barrier that I did not want to ignore, it is beyond the resources and scope of this study.   My goal was to interview 12

participants maximum, because I wanted to be able to afford to provide each participant with compensation.   My sample size consisted of 8 participants.

In order to recruit my sample, I worked with various homeless shelter and organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area, specifically ones that serve women with children and families.   I started by sending an introductory email to a contact person at the organization (See Appendix B).   My goal in connecting with staff initially was to gain approval to post flyers around their shelter to recruit my sample.   These organizations assisted me by hanging flyers themselves in locations that would be visible to clients at their organization.   See Appendix C: Flyer.   To ensure variability in my sample in terms of what types of services participants have access to, I recruited a small number of participants each from a total of around three to five shelters. According to studies I reviewed in the literature that worked with similar homeless populations, I kept in mind that support and help from shelter staff seems critical in successful completion of sample recruitment (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012).

I was informed by an organization called Compass Family Services that most of their clients do have cell phones or email access.   With that knowledge, I designed my flyers with a work phone number and email address specifically for my thesis where I could be reached by potential participants.

My screening questions followed the list of criteria for my study.   Five of the participants called me, and three I recruited by going to drop in hours at a shelter.   Either over the phone or in person, I asked potential participants if they are female, if they are homeless, if they are the mother of at least one school age child, if they have custody of the child, if the child is enrolled in school, and about their history of homelessness.   During phone screening, I informed them of whether they were eligible or not in the same phone call after they answered

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questions, and I invited the eligible ones to participate and to ask any questions.   Once they verbally agreed, I then explained that before the interview takes place, they would be given an Informed Consent form to sign (Appendix E), but that their information will remain confidential and no other paperwork would be required.   I briefly explained the contents of the informed consent, and they signed it in person for the interview.   Ultimately during screening, then, participants had to pass screening questions, verbally agree to voluntarily participate, and verbally agree to commit to one interview where informed consent would be obtained.

Ethics and Safeguards

All participants signed an informed consent form.   The informed consent explained to participants the risks and benefits to being involved in my study.   The benefits of participation in my study were as follows: You will have a chance to be heard, to talk about issues important to you, to make others aware of challenges you face that may be overlooked.   The risks were as follows: My interview questions are about a topic that may be stressful for participants, and feelings of emotional vulnerability may arise.   I provided participants with a list of mental health support services to be used if needed, in addition to a list of housing resources. Confidentiality was assured in that all identifying information was disguised, pseudonyms were used, and informed consents and audio recordings will be kept in a private, locked file for a maximum of three years.

Data Collection Methods

Since my sample consisted of a population that did not have a consistent schedule and was facing a multitude of stressors that come with homelessness, I arranged to meet with each participant only one time.   During our meeting, informed consent was signed and interview questions were asked.   Interviews were scheduled in two hour time slots, but were usually

completed within one hour.   Interviews were held at a location agreed upon with the participant, and ranged from a public park, shelters, and common space within transitional housing program buildings.

To gain narrative data from my participants, interviews were semi-structured.   I asked about demographic data such as age, race, income, education background, and then I moved from closed to open ended questions.   This way I could gain specific information, such as if and why the participant has been involved in their child's education, but I could also move to open ended questions to obtain information about their individual experiences and perceptions.   See Appendix D: Interview Questions.   I included around 7 open ended questions based on some methodologies of similar studies that use semi-structured interviews to gain narrative data (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012).   I recorded interviews using a hand-held recording device.

Data Analysis

I transcribed the interviews, which were the primary data for analysis.   Following the transcription process, I used content analysis and created a code book by using themes from the interviews but also included unique experiences of each of the mother's as well as points of overlap between their experiences.   The codebook was created by reading and re-reading the transcripts and making note of themes, which were based on "categories of meaning" across interviews, versus individual words and phrases which may vary between participants.   I drew my conclusions from the cumulative analysis of the interviews.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Introduction

      This chapter presents data collected from interviews with eight homeless mothers of school-age children.   The findings reported below are based on the interview questions found in Appendix D.   Questions ranged from collection of demographic information to closed and open-ended questions about various aspects of each participant's situation of homelessness, experience of parenting school-age children while homeless, and specifics of their involvement or barriers to involvement in their children's education.   Findings will be presented first with a focus on the results of the two main questions of my study: What is the level of parental involvement of homeless mothers in their children's educations, and what are the perceived barriers to their involvement?   Subsequently, results will be reported about general challenges of each participant's experience and current living situation, followed by a shift of focus to the mothers' perception and knowledge of their children's experience as homeless youth.

Demographics

      There were a total of eight participants in this study.   All participants fit the initial screening criteria: Mothers that are currently homeless with at least one school-age child, or mothers that were at one point in the past ten years homeless with at least one school-age child. Participants were between the ages of 28 and 50, with half of the participants being in their 30's. The majority of participants (n=7) were single mothers, with one participant that was married and homeless with their partner (n=1).

The racial make-up of the participants were caucasian (n=4), black (n=2), native american (n=1), and one that identified as both russian and cuban (n=1). All participants were English speaking. One participant was born outside of the United States in Algeria. In terms of homelessness, the participants represented a range of situations: currently in transitional housing (n=4), currently in homeless shelters (n=2), and not currently homeless but had been living in homeless shelters within the past ten years (n=2). The participants also represented a diverse range of educational backgrounds, with some that completed through high school (n=2), some that were college educated (n=3), and others that were currently in college (n=3). The time spent homeless either past or present ranged from 1 to 2 years for all participants, except for one that was only homeless for a few months at the time of interviewing.

Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of Sample

Pseudonym	Age/Race	Education Level Completed	Current living situation/ Length of time homeless	Number of Kids	Age of Kids	Stated major reason for homelessness, if any
Naomi	57, White/ Algerian	Master's Degree	Transitional Housing for 1 year	2	3.5 and 4.5 yrs old	Personal
Lara	45, African American	High School	Homeless in 2005 for a couple years/shelters	3	4, 7, 8 yrs old	Financial
Veronica	28, Native American	High school/Currently in college	Transitional Housing for 1.5 years	3	9, 5, 1 yr old	Addiction and Domestic Violence
Roxanne	33, Caucasian	High school/ currently in college	Transitional Housing for 1.5 years	2	7, 5 yrs old	Domestic Violence
Melinda	39, Cuban/Russian	College	Homeless shelters for a few months	1	12 yrs old	Financial due to health issues
Maria	37, African American	College	Homeless shelters for 13 months	3	3rd grade, 8th grade, 11th grade	Unclear
Krista	50, Cauasian	High School	Homeless in 2005 for a couple years/shelters	6	3, 7, 11, 13; others grown	Addiction
Frances	35, Caucasian	High School/Current in College	Transitional Housing for almost 2 years	1	6	Unclear

Parental Involvement in Child's Education:

Child's length of time at current school/ or if homeless in past, in school at time of homelessness

In order to gain context for each family's current situation regarding their child's education, one of the first questions all respondents were asked was how long their child has been at their current school, or, for participants who were homeless at a previous time, how long they were in one school during the time of homelessness. The responses of all eight participant were as follows: five months/three months for sibling, a few months, two years/one year for sibling, a few months, 17 months, one year, unclear, unclear. I find this information necessary background in order to understand each participant's full experience regarding their child's school.

Parent's connectedness with school

The participants were first asked general closed ended questions to begin to create an overall picture of the depth of parental involvement in the sample. When asked if they have met their children's current teacher or teacher at time of homelessness, only two participants responded that they had not. The other six said that they had met their child's teacher. Those two that said they hadn't were the two participants that were homeless in the past but not currently.

When asked if the current school or school attended at the time of homelessness knew that the participants were homeless, the majority of respondents (n=6) reported that, yes, the school did know. Five of these six participants told the school themselves, whereas with one of them, it is unclear of whether the parent told the school or the school found out from the child or

elsewhere, and this is one that was homeless in the past.   Of the two participants that stated that the school did not know about their homelessness, one was homeless within the past ten years and one was currently homeless.

All of the participants responded that they had been to their child's school.   The reasons for and frequency of being present at the school varied among some participants.   Three of the participants reported going to the school only as the necessary minimum, such as if there was a required meeting for their child due to a behavioral issue.   Three other participants stated that they go to the school a consistent amount for regular parent-teacher conferences and school performances, but nothing more than that.   The remaining two participants, though, discussed being especially involved and present at the school, one to reach out for resources and the other for reasons related to their child's IEP, or individualized education plan.

When asked about having met other school staff aside from the teacher, three of eight participants said yes: One stated that they had had meetings with the principal and speech therapist, another said they have met with the principal, and a third participant reported having met and spoken to the school peer counselor.

Parental Involvement Specifically Related to the Topic of Education and SchoolWork

There are multiple aspects of parental involvement in a child's education, and participants were asked some questions related directly to the topic of education and schoolwork: Their thoughts and opinions on education in general, if they discuss it (school, homework, education, academics, related to future goals) with their children and what types of discussions they might have, and if they help their children with homework.

100% of the respondents replied that they feel education is very important.   One respondent said with conviction, "It's the most valuable part of your foundation."   Another one

elaborated on why she feels it's important:

It's very very important that they get their education, learn how to read and write, and

also helping with their people skills and communication with other kids, other

personalities, when they're growing and learning and school helps with that.   It's

important to move on from school to college.

100% of the respondents also said that they do discuss school and education with their

child.   Exact detail of the types of conversation was varied depending on the age of the child.

Participants with younger children (n=6) all agreed that discussions about school mainly focused

on asking how the schooldays went. Veronica, a respondent with a younger child, also said she

emphasized the importance of reading: "I tell him that all the time.   It's important that he learns

and wants to read and loves books." Of the two respondents with older children, Lara reported

having talked more about future opportunities by explaining to her children, "You could be

whatever you wanna be by staying in school and getting good grades."   However, the other one,

Maria, said that she focuses on more immediate, every day concerns, such as cleanliness,

keeping fingernails looking clean, hair washed, and overall looking presentable at school.   In

addition, 100% of participants said that they do help with homework as long as time permits.

Perceived Barriers to Parent's Communication with School About Homelessness

As mentioned above, two of the eight respondents reported that they had not disclosed to

the school that they were homeless or in transitional housing.   One of these respondents,

Veronica, was asked to elaborate on her reason for not disclosing this information about her

living situation to the school.   She explained,

I usually don't have a problem explaining things. I don't really know, I feel like they

would kind of try to help me or make me feel helpless, and I already have a lot of

resources.   If I need help I usually ask for a lot of help, but right now I'm really good and my son's really good.

The other respondent that stated she did not tell the school she was homeless, Lara, was recounting about when she had been homeless in 2005 and 2006.   She stayed "wherever she could could" in shelters or on the streets.   She explained that she didn't have a reason for not telling them, and that the school knew she was in some financial difficulty and transition but that there were "no details."   When asked how she felt she was treated by the school staff when she was there, she replied "good."   This is one of the respondents that had minimal connection with the school and had not met the children's teachers, and she only went to school "if the kids were acting out like for meetings."

Another respondent, Melinda, pointed out her belief that schools "filter" information, and gave the example that at her daughter's school, the peer counselor knew they were homeless but not the teachers.

One of the respondents that had said yes to the question of whether or not participants informed the school they were homeless, Roxanne, went on to explain that her answer of yes was conditional to the school her children were currently at.   She said,

It depends on the school.   We happened to get into a good one, so when they get cases like ours, which is rare, they pride themselves in being able to help.   Whereas schools that deal with people in our situation on a regular basis, it becomes more of a, 'oh another one', type situation.   It depends on the school's attitude toward the homeless community period.   And how much finances the school has.   It effects the attitudes of administration and the teachers.

She continued, "I feel very supported if I ever need to talk to them."

Perceived Barriers to Parent's Involvement with School Community

In terms of school community beyond just the staff, such as general atmosphere and interaction with other parents of students at the school, participants were asked to describe how it felt being at the school, and how they felt they were treated by staff and other parents.   Most of the respondents (n=5) provided simple responses, such as "good," and did not have examples to elaborate on, but three respondents did discuss negative feelings.

One of the participants, Krista, pointed out that in general there was and still is a lot of stigma, and both parents and students can be made to feel like outcasts.

Melinda, when asked how it feels to be around people at the school, said, "It's emotionally debilitating at times."   She explained that her family had only been homeless for a few months, and they had gone from a two bedroom house to living in shelters.   "It's embarrassing.   Anyone has pride.   Nowadays with the lack of humanity, and less philanthropy, there are all these issues and everybody's judgmental."   She continued, "it's been hard for us to accept it."

The third participant, Roxanne, explained that since her children are at a school that doesn't have a lot of cases of homelessness, she feels uncomfortable around the other parents.

They treat me very well but I feel completely out of place and woefully underneath them. I see all these very capable parents….   It's more of just a feeling.   Looking around and looking at all these people in suits, knowing how successful they are.   They ask me what I do, I have to respond that 'Im in college, so they ask what I teach, and then I have to say, no, I go to school.   They say, oh that's great.   But I'ts these little things………. Those little things set us apart and make us feel more self-conscious.

Other Challenges to Parental Involvement in School

All of the participants were asked about what they see as the biggest challenge or challenges to their ability to be more involved with their child's school.   They were also asked if there are things they have wanted to attend or be part of but haven't been able to, and if so, what was it that prevented them.

Each one of the participants at some point in their interviews expressed that they feel there is not enough time in the day and they are often rushed.   The majority of the respondents (n=7) are single mothers, except for Melinda whom is married, and have a lot on their plates. Naomi compared the length of the school day in the United States to her country of origin:

> I find it hard because my son goes to school from 9:20 to 1:20, so it makes it a little bit hard for me because I need the whole day, I need to work on myself and do all the things I need as a single parent.   So we're working on putting him somewhere else for the other half of the day.   I would prefer how back in Algeria, when the kids start school it means the whole day. The parents are able to relax.

In addition to being single mothers, three of the participants were in school themselves. Veronica explained that she needs to focus on her own internship and school program.   Frances stated that she is often very tired.

Veronica and Roxanne also gave specific examples of things they would have liked to participate in at their children's school but were not able to.   Veronica expressed a desire to have had more regular and in depth communication with her child's teacher.   She said, "I kind of lost track and I haven't really communicated with the teacher or the school.   I just drop him off and pick him up pretty much."   Roxanne said that she would have loved to join the PTA but that she doesn't have enough time.   She explained, "I'll work on it next year. One step at a

time. Right now I'm just too overwhelmed."

Housing Specific Challenges

Since this study defines homelessness broadly, the living situations of the participants varied.   Four of the participants were living in transitional housing, one was living between shelters and a car, one was living in shelters, and the two that were homeless in the past both lived in shelters.   While all of the participants had a lot of commonalities and evidence of shared experience in their responses to the interview, there were some very specific differences based on the type of living situation they were in.   One interview question that helped highlight this was when participants were asked what they would say the most challenging aspect of being homeless specifically with a school-age child is.

Transitional Housing

Transitional housing programs are a resource that provides clients with free or subsidized housing if they meet certain criteria, such as homelessness, with children, working to put themselves through school, recovering from addiction, and beyond, and provide services such as case management with the long term goal of stable housing.   The programs usually provide housing for around a couple of years, and though it is not permanent, it is more stable than the daily changes of shelters.

Of the four participants in transitional housing, three of them were in the same program: Naomi, Roxanne, and Frances.   This program accepts clients that are homeless but working toward self-sufficiency, such as by enrolling in school, and houses them in their own apartment unit with their family.   Roxanne explained,

The transitional housing is wonderful but the program requirements are

counterproductive and a waste of time.   For example, we have to go to all these groups,

such as life skills, which doesn't teach you anything.   Community meetings are fine but

we have them so often.   I have to go to therapy every week no matter what, whereas I

have things to do, my own homework and homework to do with my kids, but I have these

other time commitments.   So it's like I waste this hour plus traveling, then leave with

anxiety because I didn't get projects done.

And, "the living situation provides stability but requirements interfere with things you'd rather

prioritize like homework."   The other two women in this program expressed similar thoughts

about the struggle to balance commitments for the program, themselves, and their children.

In contrast, the one participant in a different program, Veronica, was in transitional

housing for people in recovery from addiction, and she did not express that program

requirements interfered with her own priorities.   Instead, because of the specific focus on

recovery, she spoke positively of the program components.   However, it is clear that in this

program, as well, there are many similar requirements: "There's a lot of church activities, sunday

school on sundays.   We have processing groups on Monday, house meetings on Tuesdays, and

we have AA meetings and NA meetings."

Homeless Shelters

The other four participants had lived or were currently living in various homeless

shelters.   Despite the difference among these participants in terms of the shelter, number of

children, and time period when homeless, all of them replied with very similar answers in

response to the question of what is the most challenging aspect of being homeless with a

school-age child and living in shelters.

The most prominent challenge that all respondents mentioned first and emphasized was

the sleep issues that accompany shelter life.   Whether it was from other people in the shelter being loud, having to wake up extremely early, not feeling safe, or not having a shelter bed for the night, inability to get a good night's sleep was a shared issue.

Another response consistent across all four women was the shelter life's effect on their children being on time to, or even attending, school.   Melinda explained, "Time is of the essence. If you get down too late to the showers and breakfast then you're late to school because of other people taking forever."   Correspondingly, Maria described her and her child having to wake up at 5am to wait for showers in order to get ready and arrive to school on time.

Three other subjects gave examples of the challenge of getting to school some days. Lara said of the instability in not knowing if you'll be able to secure a bed each night,

> They have to show up at the church every night. They just show up, and if they full, no
> more people can come. So, when you have a child that's in school, and you have nowhere
> to go, neither of you have slept, the priority is find shelter. Then *if* we get shelter, maybe
> if, then maybe my child could go to school.

The second respondent in this example, Roxanne, who was one of the ones staying in transitional housing, reflected on when she was previously in shelters.   She described a time that her and her children could only find beds in a location far from the children's school in an area that she was unfamiliar with.   The next morning, she had no idea how to get to school from there and not enough time or money to figure it out since they were across the city.   Thirdly, Krista spoke of a time that all six of her children got lice from the shelter, but she couldn't afford the wash treatment to get rid of it, so her kids couldn't go to school.

A third significant issue mentioned by three of the four shelter participants was doing laundry.   Maria responded that laundry was her biggest challenge when it comes to being

homeless with a school-age child; the struggle to keep clean clothes, lay them out, organize them.   Similarly, Melinda mentioned during the interview that at that very moment she had a pile of wet clothes with her because the dryer machine at her shelter broke.

Some other responses among participants were the lack of cleanliness of the shelters, the instability of having to secure beds every day and knowing you might not get one, and a child's backpack getting stolen.

The participants were asked about if, where, and how their children were able to do homework while staying at shelters.   One replied, "You've gotta be creative," and spoke of going to the park with her daughter to do homework.   Other participants gave examples of doing homework on the bus, in cafes, and in churches.   Roxanne spoke of her children not being able to do homework: "When we were in the actual homeless shelter there was no doing homework… there was no place to do it, it didn't feel safe enough to do it, there wasn't quiet time enough to do it."

Other Challenges

The participants were asked to identify any aspects of homelessness that are most challenging for them aside from having a school-age child.   There are two themes that arose in the participants responses: The loss of autonomy, and general impact of homelessness on their emotional and mental well-being.

100% of the participants discussed the lack of autonomy that accompanies homelessness and having to rely on shelters or transitional housing.   Three subjects in particular discussed negative feelings about the tight schedules of their housing situations.   Roxanne, for example, jokingly referred to the transitional housing as an "army base."   Two of the participants staying in homeless shelters both spoke very similarly about the loss of freedom they experienced.

Melinda said, for example,

> You're used to your own routine in your own home. You go about your day, make your
>
> coffee, read the paper. Now in a shelter, you wake up at six am when they tell you,
>
> sometimes there's coffee sometimes there's not, no selection of what you want to eat.

Similarly, Maria spoke of how she used to like to wake up and relax in bed, which is not possible

at the shelter.

In terms of general difficulties, many of the participants included some references to the

mental and emotional struggle they've experienced.   Melinda referred to homeless life in

general as "mentally exhausting."   Maria stated that in the shelter she is often "woken up by

anxiety."   Naomi said, "It's very hard. I feel like I grew another ten years in a few months."

Perceived Effects of Homelessness on the Youth

After reflecting on their own experience, the participants were asked to focus on what

they perceive as the biggest challenges for their children in terms of being homeless.   They

were first asked questions specifically related to the youth's school involvement and

performance, and then were directed to reflect more broadly on overall challenges.   Responses

included themes of the difficulty of transitions, social and peer-related issues, and impacts on

mental health, behavior, and development.

At school

Participants were asked closed ended questions about their children's grades and

academic performance, general feelings about school, participation in extracurricular activities,

and, if old enough to do so, their disclosure to anyone at the school about their homelessness.

Participants with children old enough to be receiving grades for at least a year (n=4) were

asked to comment on their children's overall academic success.   The two that were currently homeless, Melinda and Maria, both said that their kids got "good grades."   The two participants that were homeless in the past, Lara and Krista, did have school-age children that were receiving grades during the time of homelessness, and though exact details were unclear, one reported that her children struggled in school.

The six participants that were currently homeless were asked if they believe their children like school or not.   Three of them said yes, and a fourth said, "Yes, *a lot*".   Of the other two, Frances was not sure, and Melinda explained that since they just moved to the area a few months ago, it is too soon to know.   These six participants were also asked about their children's participation in extracurricular activities, and five of the six said yes.   Three of the five that said yes referred to after school programs as an extracurricular activity.   In addition, all four of the participants currently in transitional housing mentioned that their housing programs have many activities for youth to engage in rather than ones at school.   Only one of these subjects, Roxanne, said that her kids were not doing extracurricular activities because of time limits at the moment, but both of her kids were in the school play that year.   Of the subjects with past homelessness, Krista said that her kids participated in Head Start, and Lara said that her children did not do extracurricular activities when they were homeless.

Five of the eight participants were asked if any of their children had disclosed to peers, teachers, or other school staff that they were homeless.   Krista and Lara with past homelessness were unsure.   The other three all said yes; Roxanne said that her oldest daughter was very open with both peers and teachers, Maria said her oldest daughter told friends and teachers and emphasized that she was very open with her teachers, and Melinda said her daughter *only* told staff but not peers.

In terms of other effects of homelessness on education, participants were asked to identify any other school-related challenges for their youth, and to state what their number one concern was about their children's education.   Four of the respondents spoke of their child displaying behavioral issues at school. One of them, Veronica, did not give specific examples, but said that her son started "acting out" in his kindergarten class after moving around so much. Naomi, also in transitional housing and speaking about a kindergarten-age child that had moved many times in the previous year, said that on the first day of school the child threw tantrums, screamed very loud, and scratched her teacher.   The other two participants that spoke of behavioral problems, Maria and Krista, both had older children that got involved in the juvenile system.   Krista said that her older son ended up not finishing high school and being involved in the prison system.   Maria's daughter, currently in 11th grade, had been involved in the juvenile system, and Maria said her daughter began stealing before they became homeless, but continued having issues and currently had a probation officer.

Some other issues mentioned by participants were the previously referred to attendance issues due to the instability of shelter life.   Roxanne brought up the point that because of this instability, the youth get blamed by the teacher or school for thing that are out of their control, such as being late or not attending.   She said, "The teachers are on them for something that is the responsibility of the parent."   She also explained that even when herself or other parents call the school to explain their situation and what is going on, the school would understand, but the repots still go out to the actual school district, and, she said, "we're just numbers at that point."

Transitions

62% of the participants (n=5) spoke of the instability of transitions and constant moving when homeless.   The main issue was that if the family was able to get shelter somewhere far

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from where the child was in school, they might have to move to a different school, as housing was the first priority.   Veronica explained that her kindergartener had already been in five different schools in the past year.   On one occasion, he started at one school and had to move to another one only two weeks later.   Frances, when asked what the biggest challenge was for her children, responded about the transitional housing situation being "temporary.   Being aware that this isn't going to last."   Naomi described the constant moves for her young children: "Prepare to go to another place, meet other people, the community changes. It's hard for them to figure out what's going on…….. very hard for their little brains to understand what's going on."   In concordance, three other subjects spoke of the kids missing school, of the desire and goal to keep their children in just one school long-term, and the frustration in not being able to answer a child's question about the length of homelessness; "She wants to know when we'll get out of this situation."

Social Issues

Another theme among responses about challenges for the youth was the navigating of social relationships while homeless.   Half of the subjects spoke about their children's interactions with peers, and that homelessness can create a barrier in peer relations.   Roxanne explained that "it effects them as they feel shut out and different from the other children." Similarly, Krista was reflecting on her daughter and said that homelessness "socially affected her."   Melinda said of her family's abrupt change from a house to a homeless shelter, "My daughter doesn't tell her peers. She's embarrassed. She begs me not to tell her friends."   She continued, "She's a preteen, she's never had to face this type of dysfunction. She's aware of being judged by her peers."   She also went on to discuss how living in a shelter impacts her pre-teen daughter's developing social identity by leaving her with low self-esteem when she is unable to

have and choose the clothes she wants to wear to school.   Finally, Roxanne mentioned the fact that when they were living in shelters, her daughter would beg to have sleepovers or set up play dates, but it was not possible because of both lack of space and not knowing where they might be staying next.

Naomi and Melinda, one in transitional housing and one in homeless shelters, mentioned the social atmosphere of their current living situations as a challenge.   Naomi expressed concern about the social limitations and possible negative impact that could come with living in a transitional housing community and her daughter attending the program's pre-school: "I want her to meet people coming from regular families, not just homeless families. Because the homeless families have issues, because of difficulties."   Melinda talked about the various people that came in and out of the homeless shelter they were staying at:

> You have less intelligent people who just want to start fights, try to intimidate you, try to yell at you, antagonize you. You have to ignore them or walk away….….If you're not a people person, or used to dealing with strong attitudes, it's gonna wear you down.

Impact on Mental Health and Development

Exactly half of the respondents talked about the negative impacts homelessness has had on their youth.   Veronica and Melinda spoke specifically of anxiety about the situation being passed to their children.   For example, Melinda said, "That's what takes away from the youth…you're a kid, you shouldn't have to worry about this mess.   That's where the biggest drawback is of being a kid."

Veronica spoke about her kindergarten age son that was in a child trauma research program to receive therapy for a diagnosis of PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) related to the abrupt transitions of homelessness, and the domestic violence that led to his mother's

homelessness.   As part of the program, Veronica does play therapy with a therapist and her son, during which she learned that "he kind of worries. I have anxiety, so when we leave he's sort of picking it up, asking where we're going, or getting confused when we went a new bus route." She also explained that she was always thinking and being strict about planning and scheduling and never played with him, but therapy has taught her to take the time to both explain transitions to him and play more.   She said she now sets aside time for them to play every day, and she said for the play time, "I'll just throw my phone over to the side."

Roxanne, also homeless after domestic violence, reflected on her daughter and "the overall trauma she's experienced."   She explains that they both go to therapy as part of the transitional housing program, but her daughter will not trust or talk to anyone other than her. Her daughter was having a hard time in school until receiving an IEP (individualized education program).   Roxanne also went on to discuss her children and other homeless youth in general in regards to internalization.   For example, if a child continually comes late to school, "then they start to internalize it, that there's something wrong with them, it's their fault they're late, their fault they didn't make it to school."

In addition, Naomi spoke about attachment with her children, and the struggle to make it strong during instability and to find individual time to bond with each of her two young children. She said, "It's still hard because kids that age need routine, to be safe, to feel safe in order to grow and be healthy."   She in general expressed concern about her son seeming "lost" at one point, and gave an example of a recent time that his class had a party where all of the parents were able to attend except her.   She said she worried that he must have felt lonely and that she does not want him to be the only one in class without his mom there, and she also said she would be sure to make effort to always go to things that all the other parents will be at.   However, as a

homeless single mother, she recognized that that is a challenge.

Resources

　　All of the participants were asked about resources: What resources the school has in terms of support or extracurricular activities, and which resources in general have been the most and least helpful.　One theme that came up with 50% of the participants was the fact that they moved to the San Francisco Bay area specifically for the plethora of resources, whether for addiction, domestic violence, or homelessness.

School

　　None of the participants responded that they felt the school had helpful resources for their situation or any specific resources for homeless youth at school.　There was mention of free bus transportation and free lunch, but nothing further was reported.

　　Three participants, however, specifically discussed their children's teachers as a very helpful resource.　Roxanne and Melinda gave examples of teachers chipping in to buy the student a resource that they could not afford, one a small plastic piano to practice on and the other a backpack.　In addition, Maria mentioned that her daughter's teacher would sometimes help her daughter out with bus money.

　　Naomi and Veronica also reported that the teachers were a helpful resource in terms of communication that is accessible to them.　For example, both of them described a communication notebook that is passed back and forth between them and the teacher to stay updated about what is going on for their children at school and at home.

Culture and Community Resources

　　Two participants spoke about cultural resources as a positive source of support.

Veronica described the Native American Community Center with dance classes and social networks.   Roxanne discussed her involvement with the Jewish Community Center and use of their resource such as summer camps.   And, both explained that the community provided by these resources is enormous, with friendships and socialization opportunities for both them and their children.

Veronica and Frances talked about the community provided by their transitional housing programs.   The two most positive supports from this community were reported as childcare opportunities and relating to people going through a similar experience.

Challenges with Resources

Also, many participants (n=) spoke of the issue that, even when shelters or transitional housing program were providing them with housing, the program was insensitive about and did not care about the fact that some of these homes were in very dangerous, uncleanly neighborhoods.   For this reason, many women found that housing resources frustrating/not that helpful because of that.   Or, placed somewhere where you have to walk through very bad areas to get to school.

Conclusion

Overall, there were many common threads that wove through the narrative responses of the participants.   While each participant had their own unique, specific answer to the interview questions asked, the main themes within their responses were the lack of time, energy, and resources that created a struggle to balance homelessness and parenting, the benefits but also challenges associated with housing programs, adverse effects of shelter life on youth's academic success, and overall observance of resilience but also negative mental health and behavioral effects on some youth, as the youth grapple the making sense of their situation, as well.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

Introduction

This study sought to answer the following main questions: 1) What is the level of parental involvement of homeless mothers in their children's education, and 2) What are the perceived barriers to involvement. Within these two questions, the interview was designed to obtain information about the experience of homeless mothers from their own point of view, and for them to shed light on where the gaps in interventions for them, and their children, are. The backdrop behind the entire study is the assumption that youth's that are homeless have challenges regarding academic success, and parental involvement in education is a positive influence that can help remedy negative academic outcomes.

The first part of this section will reflect on the answers participants gave to the main inquires of the study. Then, my study results will be compared to those in the literature. And finally, implications for future research, practice and policy will be discussed.

This section will also focus on another gap in the literature: How to intervene to address both *homelessness and parenting.*

What is the level of parental involvement by homeless mothers in their children's education?

There is not one single definition or aspect of parental involvement, and this question cannot be answered simply as a a yes or no question. For the purpose of this study, parental

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involvement is defined as learning activities that parents engage in at home and school, such as reading and reviewing homework, and communication that occurs between parents and school personnel.   School-based, home-based, and academic socialization all together create parental involvement.   Academic socialization is defined as   "the communication of parental expectations about schoolwork and the importance of education, encouragement of educational and career goals, and making plans with them to support their future goals" (Want and Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

Based on the results of my interviews with eight participants, there was a great deal of evidence of parental involvement, which is contrary to my initial hypothesis that parental involvement would overall be very low.   In order to answer this question,   I will use a combination of the findings obtained from the following interview questions: *Have you ever been to your child's school, have you met your child's teacher or other school staff, does the school know you are homeless, do you help your child with homework, tell me what you think about school and education in general, if you have been to the school then for what types of events or reasons, how do you contact the school, what is your number one concern about your child's education, what would your vision of a perfect education system for your child look like right now,   and finally, what types of discussions do you and your child have about school, homework, education or academics in general.*

Six of eight participants, or seventy-five percent, which is a majority of the participants, said that they have met their child's teacher.   Similarly, one hundred percent of the participants said that they had been to their child's school.   Though the reasons for being at the school varied, all participants said that they at the least always attend parent-teacher conferences with the teacher annually, or if they are called in to meet with the teacher for any other reason such as

a behavior issue.   Additionally, almost half of the participants (n=3) had met and interacted with school staff beyond just their child's teacher, including a principal, peer counselor, and speech therapist.

Furthermore, one hundred percent of respondents reported that they feel education is very important, and that they all have some type of discussion about some aspect of education and school with their children.   All of the participants say they are able to help their children with homework as necessary, and have means to contact the school.   The majority of participants, (n=6, 75%), reported having had informed the school of their homelessness, which speaks to some level of openness and strong communication.   In terms of my study and perhaps where it is geographically located, this refutes some statements in the literature that "many communities and school districts are unaware that homelessness exists in their localities" (Bowman, 2013).

One important fact to highlight here is that the levels of parental involvement in a child's education vary depending on the age of the child.   For example, one of the participants with children in eighth grade and high school report less involvement and less frequent visits to the school, but age could play a factor in this as it is not as necessary to be at school or the kids might not want their parents there as much as adolescents, versus children who are less independent.

Barriers to parental involvement in children's education

In response to the question of what the perceived barriers to parental involvement in their child's education are, the answer across all participants echo a theme of simply being pressed for time and resources, that there is not enough time in the day and they are often rushed: "One thing at a time," said one participant in response to this question.   There is simply too much to do and not enough time for the participants to balance childrearing with navigating logistics of a lack of

housing and managing their own school, work, and personal time commitments.   As mentioned in the literature and as evident within my own study, many members of this population are in school themselves and are thus "juggling" many roles (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012).   Almost half of my participants (n=3) were currently in school.

I hypothesized that stigma against homelessness and discomfort going to the school might be a barrier to parental involvement.   A large portion of the literature discussed negative stereotypes that result in homeless persons being "treated negatively" (Swick, 2008).   However, my findings do not support this hypothesis.   100% of the participants stated that they have experienced being treated well by the school staff and/or community.   Though the interview did not leave room for elaboration or specifics on this question, there was no mention of poor treatment.   Thus, based on my study, stigma is not one of the barriers to parental involvement in education for my participants.

Low self-esteem as a result of negative stigma and stereotypes, however, is present in my sample and the literature.   Two of the challenges reported by Swick's (2008) study respondents were "perceptions others have of them as parents," and low self-esteem.   Correspondingly, two of the participants in my study reported feeling self-conscious when around the school and other parents of the school community.   Thus, in this sense, stigma may be a barrier as a result of its effect on participant's self-esteem rather than perceived treatment by the school.   When Swick and Reginald (2010) asked their study members what they would like to change or see happen, a number of people said the elimination of negative stereotypes.   My study further supports this, as self-consciousness among my participants speaks to a universal awareness of negative stereotypes, whether or not these stereotypes lead to bad treatment at their children's school.

A common point in the literature is the notion that homeless mothers are lacking in their own education and life skills (Swick, 2008). My study greatly counters this idea. Though my study is not generalizable to the larger population, all of my participants completed high school, two went to college, and one has a master's degree. Since my findings were unexpected in the topic of education history of the mothers, future research should collect more demographic information about the population of homeless mothers in order to best create interventions that help them and meet them where they are at.

Transitional Housing Related Challenges

The need to create interventions to target the varying needs of members of this population is further highlighted by the participants in my study that discussed their experiences in transitional housing. Correspondingly, as stated in the literature about various housing programs, these services "may not be adequately prepared to address the unique needs" of homeless parents. A number of studies in the literature discuss various types of transitional housing programs because they are a major resource for homeless families (Dworsky and Meehan, 2012); (Hone and Psiecher, 2012); (Swick, 2008).

Both in my study and in the literature, some of the main challenges associated with transitional housing are associated with a loss of autonomy and control. One of my participants in particular discussed the various requirements of living in housing provided by the program, including therapy, groups, and meetings, that interfere with things she would rather prioritize like her and her children's homework and school projects. I feel that this perfectly highlights an example of a mistake that comes from assuming that people in her position have low education and low life skills, with the required skills-related groups and courses, and also a lack of room for the prioritizing of education. Similarly, though therapy is often vital and important for some

people, it might not be for other people, and the therapy requirement for this program is also based on an assumption of a lack of skills.

Programs that consider the root cause of the person's homelessness seem more productive.   One of my participants that was in a transitional housing program for recovering addicts said that she felt supported by all of the resources in the program since she was working to maintain her sobriety in alignment with the program's goals.   Again, this points to a need to individualize housing programs based on the history, skill and education level, and future goals of each individual.   Also, the programs need to enable the clients flexibility to pursue education and jobs for long term sustainability after the program ends, in addition to having time to devote to youth's schooling.

One study poignantly highlights some limitations of transitional housing specifically in terms of the academic success of their youth (Hone and Psiecher, 2012).   The authors point out that once families are in stable transitional housing, school attendance rates for the children go up, in addition to the frequency of IEP's (individualized education programs) because they are attending school enough to receive them.   In my study, for example, two of the families in transitional housing had a child with an IEP.   However, the study points out that we cannot fall into thinking that this means success and interventions can stop there, because although attendance rates rose for these students, their test and other academic scores did not.   Thus, there is a strong need for more academic resources to offer youth in these programs once they are attending school, such as tutoring.   Also, another one of my participants mentioned how helpful a resource the transitional housing program is in terms of providing books for her child to read, suggesting that all family-oriented housing programs could benefit clients and academic success by having this resource.

Shelter Related Challenges

In my study and in the literature as well, there is evidence of a different set of challenges accompanying homeless mothers living in shelters (Swick, 2008); (Pearlman and Fantuzzo, 2010). These challenges are mainly strict schedules, loss of private space, and overall loss of autonomy. However, two major themes that came up in my study that I did not encounter in the literature are the challenges associated with the following: Laundry and sleep. Considering that sleep is well known to be such an important factor in academic success and overall daily functioning, there was no mention in the literature of sleep as it relates to youth that are homeless. Many of my participants spoke of getting enough sleep as one of the most pressing challenges of shelter life, which points to a need for more attention to be devoted to this issue for the homeless population, especially youth. Additionally, the difficulties in keeping clean laundry and clothes in a shelter proved a huge barrier for youth's self-esteem as they present themselves in school every day. Respondents reported that it was a struggle to find available washers and dryers, as well as space to keep clothes.

In terms of effects on academic success, present in both the literature and my study are reports of the attendance issues that result from the instability of shelter life. However, other points mentioned in my study that I did not come across in the literature are a lack of space for homework and lack of feeling safe enough to do homework in shelters, along with internalization of negative feelings for youth. One participant in my study explained her belief that when a child is continually late to school, the teachers blame the student even if it is not their fault, and eventually the student will internalize this blame and feel like it is their fault that they are late because there is something wrong with them. Internalization points to a strong need for continuous communication with teachers about the greater context of a student's life. My

participant as well as the literature explains the mother's desire for the teacher to know it is not their child's fault (Milligan, 2013).

Parent-Child Attachment And Development

The theme of attachment was hugely prevalent in the literature, and in multiple studies, the notion that homeless parents lack knowledge of their children's developmental stages and needs was mentioned (Swick, 2008; Swick and Reginald, 2010).   However, I feel that it is important to note that seven out of eight participants (87%) in my study did not display a lack of knowledge in this area, which calls for the need to clarify that any new parent, not just homeless parents, have varying levels of knowledge of child development.   In fact, a couple of my participants were extremely well-versed in developmental knowledge.   Therefore, I do not think it is productive for the literature to say that this is always a negative effect on youth's schooling specifically for homeless youth.   Instead, the focus should be on how to remedy the instability and disturbances in homeless life that might interrupt attachment. As my participant Naomi explained, she often struggles to find child care for one of her kids so that she can have individual bonding time with another.   There are many studies present in the literature that focus on causation and effects of homelessness on youth (Dennis, 2010); (Masten et al, 2010). However, there needs to be a move toward looking further into interventions and remedies, such as in Hong and Piescher's (2012) study that tracked actual outcomes for youth of a certain program.

There was one participant in my study, Veronica, in which her lack of knowledge of development and attachment came up.   She explained that before attending the therapy provided by her housing program, she did not even think to prioritize setting aside time for her and her son to simply just play alone together.   After they started to play, her son's behavioral

issues that stemmed from moving between five different schools greatly improved.   I feel this situations highlights the issues that were the focus of a study done by Pearlman and Fantuzzo (2010): They sought to understand more about the types of negative effects on homeless youth and which effects might be seen depending on the age of the child during homelessness.   Their ultimate goal was to point out the ways in which negative effects might manifest themselves in youth according to specific age, and then in turn remedy these effects based on developmentally appropriate interventions.   In terms of Veronica's situation, the developmentally appropriate intervention of play proved effective in helping her son, confirming the ideas of Pearlman and Fantuzzo (2010).   The author's further suggest the collaboration between social services and educational professionals as an important intervention (Pearlman and Fantuzzo, 2010).

Resources

When asked if their child's school is a helpful resource in any way specifically in regards to their housing situation, 100% of respondents said no.   I feel that given the importance of school and education, and how much a child's life outside of school effects his or her performance within school, youth could benefit from having more school resources.   Similarly, the literature suggests more collaboration between schools and agencies (Milligan, 2013). Perhaps this collaboration could work to determine just what resources could be helpful at school, in addition to maintaining awareness across settings of the various factors of a student's life.

A number of the participants in my study reported that various community resources were a very helpful support to them.   The use of community resources ranged from extracurricular activities such as dance classes, to summer programs, to simply providing a network of people to relate to and also provide childcare.   In light of my study, the addition of

childcare and ultimately more support to turn to is a resource that can allow for more parental involvement in children's educations.

Strengths And Limitations

The methodology of my study, using semi-structured open-ended interview questions, allowed for the unique perspectives of each participant to be captured.   However, limitations to a qualitative study are the fact that results cannot be statistically tested for validity or generalized to the larger population.   In addition, because interviews were done face to face, it is possible that participants shaped their answers to what they thought I wanted to hear or what might be perceived as the best answer.   For example, a respondent might not be comfortable admitting to me in person that they do not help their child with their homework.   This means that reliability of my responses cannot be proved.

The fact that a number of my participants explained that they originally came to the location specifically for the various resources it offers, whether related to homeless, domestic violence, or addiction, could mean that my sample happens to consist of people that are especially pro-active about their situations.   This could bias my study results toward people that are more likely to be involved or discuss being homeless in relation to their children's education, and perhaps similarly are more comfortable being present and vocal at their children's schools than might be the case elsewhere.   Again, this speaks to the fact that my study is not generalizable to the larger population.

Implications For Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

I feel that my study points to a need to obtain more demographic information about the population of homeless mothers so that interventions are not created based on assumption or stigma.   Policy makers and staff of these programs need to take into account the various

backgrounds of members of the population, and the root cause of their homelessness, to work towards creating interventions that can allow for individual goal setting.

In both my study and the literature, transitional housing programs came up as a common support in the lives of homeless mothers because they are a significant resource for the population.   In terms of the academic outcomes for the youth, though, both my study and the literature point to the limits of these programs.   The strict requirements often allow little room for the mothers to be fully involved in the child's education, and simply providing stability for a couple of years is not enough to help these youth improve their school success.   There needs to be more prioritizing in these programs of resources that can supplement schooling, such as tutoring and access to books.   In addition, both my study and the literature also point to a need for agencies such as these to communicate more with school or the child's teachers.   Perhaps this can be a role for the social worker to take on, not only to ensure that there are sufficient resources across settings to support the child's school performance, but also to make sure the teachers are not making any assumptions about the family and are are fully aware of the student's living situation.

In terms of parental involvement with the school, perhaps the social worker can also act as a liaison between parent and school in situations where the parent is not comfortable discussing her situation.   Similarly, two participants in my study mentioned the successful form of communication with their child's teacher that involved passing a notebook back and forth each day, and I believe this could become a more widespread option to educate both families and teachers about.   Perhaps there is the need to carve out more of a specific and targeted social work role that involves supporting the education of homeless youth.

In terms of actual material resources, my study highlights challenges for my population associated with homeless shelters. Since shelter life is unstable and changes on a day to day basis, perhaps policy makers can consider enforcing some type of prioritizing of space for mothers and their school-age youth in shelters that are within a certain distance from the child's school. A child should not have to miss school or be shuffled between schools based on where there is an open bed that night. Since attending school is enforced by the law, there needs to be more support for the ability of homeless youth to do so. There is also a need for more separate space for youth to be safe to do homework, to spend enough alone time with their mother, to have more washers and dryers available, and to get enough sleep.

Based on the findings of my study, I would recommend that future research be done to shed more light on sleep as it affects the educational outcomes of youth, and in general on the effects of homelessness on educational outcomes. Since homelessness and sleep issues seem to be connected, perhaps more research on sleep issues for homeless youth can point to more resources to remedy this. And, maybe more focus on external factors for a student that effects his or her school performance can point to possibilities such as a having washers or dryers available at a school.

Finally, further research on the importance of community as an intervention to increase parental involvement of homeless mother's in their child's education is necessary. My study points to the benefits my respondents received from community support, and the creation of more community opportunities, or spreading the knowledge about existing opportunities and psycho-education on their benefits, could prove useful for the population. Community was beneficial not only as a childcare resource, but also in providing opportunities for hobbies,

connections with others, and ultimately a space to maintain a life of meaning within one of the

most difficult of life circumstances.

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      Vol 85 Number 2.

Human Subject Committee Approval Letter

SMITH COLLEGE

School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950   F (413) 585-7994
February 9, 2015

Dear Marla,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished).   This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Pearl Soloff, Research Advisor

Recruitment Email

Dear _____ ,

My name is Marla Maccia and I am a second year MSW student at Smith School for Social Work.

    I am writing to inquire about the possibility of connecting with your organization for my thesis research. My thesis topic is on mother's experiencing homelessness and their perceived barriers to involvement in their child's education. I have heard a lot about your organization and would love to discuss the possibility of my interviewing or surveying clients of _____ about their experience with homelessness regarding my thesis topic. I would be more than willing to volunteer some of my time with your organization in order to learn more about it and connect with clients and/or staff.

Thank you for your time and consideration! If interested or to receive more information from me, please email me, call me any time at XXX-XXX-XXXX, or let me know when a good time to call or stop by would be.

Sincerely,

Marla

Recruitment Flyer

Smith College School for Social Work

Are you a mother that is homeless?

Do you have at least one school-age child?

I want to hear about your experience.

I am finishing my master's degree in social work, and am completing a study looking at the challenges homeless mothers might face in being involved in their child's education.
You will be provided a gift card of $20 to Safeway or Walgreens in exchange for an hour of your time for an interview.

To see if you qualify, contact me at ---x---x----

Interview

<u>The Interview Components</u>

Part 1: Demographics
1. Age
2. Race/Ethnicity
3. Primary Language
4. Currently homeless?
5. How long are you or were you homeless?
6. How many children do you have/ ages?
7. How many children do you have enrolled in school?
8 What level of school did you yourself complete?
9. If you might be able to say in brief, what main factor do you think lead to your homelessness? (Financial? domestic violence? etc).

Part 2: Closed Ended Questions

1. How long has your child been at their current school?
2. Have you ever been to your child's school- yes or no? (Not asking for specifics yet)
3. How does your child get to and from school?
4. What kinds of grades does your child get?
5. Does your child do any extracurricular school activities?
6. Have you met your child's teacher or other school staff- yes or no?
7. Does your child like school?
8. Does the school know you are homeless?
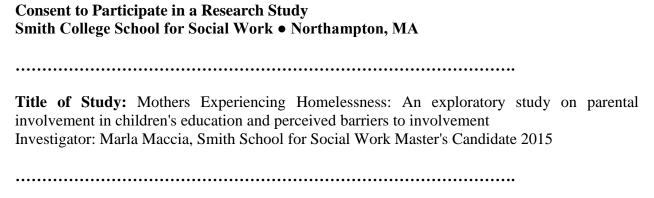9. Do you have access to phone or internet?

Part 3: Open Ended Questions

1. Tell me about what you think of school and education in general

2.
A. If you have been to your child's school: for what types of events or reasons?
If you have not: why not?   For ex, you never got invitations?   You aren't comfortable?

B. How is it to contact the school if you need to?   Are you able to ?   Why or why not?

3.   If you have been to their school, describe what that was like.   How did it feel being there?
For ex, were people friendly or not? Did you feel comfortable?

4. How do you feel you are treated by the school staff and other school community, other parents

of students?

5. What types of discussions do you and your child have about school, homework, education or academics in general; do you discuss this? If not, why not?

6. What kinds of resources does the school have for your child in terms of support, extracurricular activities, etc.? Do you know about resources? Does your child get homework help anywhere?

7. Tell me about your child's morning and after school routine

8. Tell me about what is hard being homeless particularly with a child and how you think it affects your child being in school

9. Number one concern about child's education?

10. What would your vision of a perfect education system for your child look like right now?

Letter of Informed Consent

Consent to Participate in a Research Study
Smith College School for Social Work ● Northampton, MA

………………………………………………………………………….

Title of Study: Mothers Experiencing Homelessness: An exploratory study on parental involvement in children's education and perceived barriers to involvement
Investigator: Marla Maccia, Smith School for Social Work Master's Candidate 2015

………………………………………………………………………….

Introduction
You are being asked to be in a research study about the experience of homeless mothers and their involvement and challenges to their involvement in their children's education.
You were selected as a possible participant because you are a mother of a school-age child and you are experiencing or have experienced homelessness while your child is or was enrolled in K-12 school.
We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study
The purpose of this study is to give mothers experiencing homelessness a chance to be heard, and to voice what challenges they may face when it comes to the academic success of their children and to being involved in their child's schooling. The goal of this study is to find out if homeless mothers are able to be involved in their child's education, and if not, why is that the case? The study will document the viewpoints of women like you on what their experience is like, and gain information about what challenges need to be addressed.

This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.

Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures
If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: Meet with me in a public location such as a cafe of your choosing, and participate in an interview of one hour which can be during school hours while your child is in school. I will collect personal information such as your age and race, along with questions about your experience.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study
The study has the following risk. My interview questions are about a topic that may be stressful for participants, and feelings of distress may arise. I will provide you with a list of mental health support services and information about homelessness to be used if needed. In addition,

you will only participate in this study if you want to, you can stop at any time if you decide you no longer want to participate, and compensation will still be provided even if you do not finish the interview.

Benefits of Being in the Study
The benefits of participation in my study are as follows: You will have a chance to be heard, to talk about issues important to you, to make others aware of challenges you face that may be overlooked.

The benefits to social work and society are: The purpose of this study is to gain information that may lead to the development of ways to help homeless youth succeed in school by identifying obstacles that may prevent homeless mothers from being involved in their children's education.

Confidentiality
This study is confidential.   Any identifying information will be disguised and consent forms will be stored in a locked file.
All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. We will not include any information in any report we may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift
You will receive the following payment/gift:
$25 at a Walgreens or Safeway. You will receive this gift card even if you do not finish the interview.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw
The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you.   You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the date noted below) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College.   Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled.   You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 24th. After that date, your information will be part of the thesis, dissertation or final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns
You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research.   If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Marla Maccia, at mgmthesis@gmail.com, or by telephone at ---x---x----. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the

Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent
Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep.
You will also be given referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study.

…………………………………………………………………………..

Name   of   Participant   (print):
_____
Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ **Date:** _____

…………………………………………………………………………..

1. I agree to be [audio or video] taped for this interview:

Name   of   Participant   (print):
_____
Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ **Date:** _____

2. I agree to be interviewed, but I do not want the interview to be taped:

Name   of   Participant   (print):
_____
Signature of Participant: _____ **Date:** _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ **Date:** _____