Interventions to Facilitate Homeless Youth to be Self Invested in Schools

A Research Paper

Presented to

The Faculty of the Adler Graduate School

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In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of

The Degree of Master of Arts in

Adlerian Counseling and Psychotherapy

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2014
Abstract

Homelessness is defined as a person who does not have permanent housing, including those that live on the streets, stay in a shelter, reside in abandoned buildings, vehicle, or in any other unstable location. Students who are homeless face a number of barriers that prevent academic success. These factors include basic physiological needs as well as a multitude of social-emotional barriers. School counselors have the power to influence homeless students. This paper will focus on the effects of changing school culture as well as implementing a mentorship program. School counselors have the capability of establishing a mentor program for at-risk youth. Homeless youth fall into the at-risk category. School Counselors also have the ability to connect families experiencing homelessness to resources that are vital to school success, and the survival of the family unit. Mentor Programs have proven to increase grades as well as increase students investment in school overall.
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The definition of a homeless person is quite expansive and goes beyond simply stating it as an individual who lacks housing. The Department of Health and Human Services (2014) uses the definition to include a person who is without permanent housing and may be living on the streets, staying in a shelter, mission, single room occupancy facilities, abandoned vehicle or building; or any other type of non permanent situation. It is also important to recognize individuals who are forced to stay with a series of friends and family members as a means to shelter as a form of homelessness. Recognizing the instability of a living situation is critical to the definition of what it means to be homeless.

According to the National Health Care for the Homeless Council (2014), an individual is homeless if they do not have regular, permanent nighttime housing. Furthermore, if nighttime arrangements are not ordinarily used as a place in which human beings sleep, for example a person is sleeping in a car or camper. A family living in a shelter or living in an arrangement that is temporary (such as a hotel space, or motel space, which are paid for by community organizations or by government agencies) are still considered homeless. A person is considered to be homeless if they are in imminent danger of losing their living space, with an eviction noticed served stating that they must vacate the premises within 14 days.

Data

Homelessness has become a significant and increasing social problem. Not only has the total number of those who are homeless increased over the course of the last 30 years, but the demography of homelessness has changed (National Coalition for Homeless, 2014). In the United States, families with children have been the fastest growing segment of the homeless population. The American School Counselors Association (2010) reported families that include children make up 34% of the total homeless population. It is estimated that 1.35 million children
are documented as homeless every year (The National Law Center on Homeless and Poverty, 2014).

Studies show that homeless students are fairing worse in school performance when compared to children who have homes. According to Buckner (2008), students who are homeless are more likely to be chronically tardy or absent from school altogether. Homeless students are also more likely to eventually be retained a grade. A higher percentage of students who are homeless have developmental delays (Gewirtz, Hart-Shegos & Medhanie, 2008). Specific delays were found in receptive vocabulary, visual motor skills and communication. Homeless students were performing below grade level in both reading and mathematics as well.

The Law

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act went into law in 1987 (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The law requires that each state ensures homeless children have equal access to appropriate public education. The McKinney-Vento Act gives federal funds to states for the intention of supporting homeless youth through various district programs. If any state has barriers to academic enrollment, such as compulsory residency requirements, school attendance laws, policies, or regulations, that state must review and revise policies so that homeless youth are provided free and appropriate education. The law states that homelessness is not enough of a reason to divide students from mainstream educational environments.

In 1990 and 1994 the Act was reauthorized, which further decreased barriers to children attempting to enroll in a school. This increased the funding at the state level for grants to local education agencies and also extended the services to preschool children. These amendments also stated that whenever possible, comply with parents or guardians in regards to school enrollment. The law ensured that homeless youth should also have access to the same services that any other
youth have or need in order to have the opportunity to meet the same challenging state achievement standards. Homeless youth need to be provided with the same opportunities to meet state standards as well as be held to the same accountability as any other student. Even though the law has made for homeless youth, there are still many barriers that prevent homeless students from achieving academic success.

The Professional School Counselor’s Role

According to the American School Counselor Association (2010), school counselors have the unique role in schools to advocate for students in collaboration with parents/guardians, teachers, community programs, and stakeholders. This process should be completed in an effort to reduce barriers surrounding school enrollment and success. Because homeless students have so many barriers to academic success it is imperative that school counselors work closely with homeless youth in order to alleviate as many of those barriers as possible.

Professional school counselors should also work to institute both educational programs and preventative programs for homeless youth within a school culture (American School Counselor Association, 2010). It is essential that school counselors act as collaborators with not only school, but community persons in an effort to bring together any and all programming for homeless students because many homeless students lack a parental advocate. It is also the job of the Professional School Counselor to make stakeholders as well as school personnel be aware of The McKinney-Vento Act. A school counselor should help with the enrollment process, which means that they are essential to enforcing the law. Last, it is the role of the school counselor to advocate for appropriate educational placement for all homeless youth.
Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

Prior to discussing the impact of homelessness on children’s academic performance, it is important to consider the basic affects that homelessness has on children. Typical problems homeless children experience include, but are not limited to: hunger, dirty and damaged clothes, poor hygiene, lack of quality sleep, and lack or resources to purchase basic supplies (National Coalition for Homeless, 2014). It is essential to understand how personal needs affect behavior in homeless children. Homeless students are more likely to have trouble developing academically and personally because their basic needs are not being met (Daniels, 1992).

Daniels (1992) stated homeless students are much more likely to struggle academically and personally when compared to children who are not homeless. The reason for this can be explained through what Abraham Maslow called “the hierarchy of needs.” According to Maslow (1970), humans develop as a result satisfying several basic needs. Maslow broke down these basic needs into five levels. The first level in which a person needs to satisfy before moving on to the next is physiological survival. These needs include food, protection, and basic health care. The second level that Maslow proclaimed needed to be satisfied was a person’s need for safety. Maslow declared that the need for love and belonging was the third level. The fourth level that Maslow asserted was a need to fulfill a sense of self esteem. The fifth and final level to be achieved was a sense of self-actualization. People are unable to reach the next level until all of the basic lower levels of needs are satisfied.

Homeless students are constantly trying to satisfy the basic level of survival. Students who are homeless are not able to move to the next level until their physiological survival needs are met. According to The National Health Care for the Homeless Counsel (2014) homeless youth rarely receive proper nutrition, lack appropriate clothing, and have improper health care.
Improper nutrition and lack of medical care are a result of a family’s financial struggles (Daniels, 1992). It is difficult, if not impossible for students struggling with homelessness to concentrate on anything other than getting their basic needs met. Due to this lack of basic needs being met on a daily basis many children who are homeless are not able to move on to higher levels of development.

The second level of need is for safety (Maslow, 1970). Children who are homeless often experience unsafe environments, especially if they are not able to stay in a shelter overnight. Further, shelters are often located in non-desirable places in the community (Daniels, 1992). When a child feels insecure their brains are not ripe for education. For homeless students their sense of security and safety is constantly threatened and because of this they are in a constant state of stress. The third, fourth and fifth level of needs are not satisfied because the basic two levels are never met.

**Trauma and Stress**

A disproportionate number of homeless youth experience significant traumas as compared with their non-homeless counterparts. Research has shown that approximately 75% of homeless youth experience sexual, physical, or emotional abuse (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001). It is also known that repeated experience with traumatic events further exacerbates the psychological damage. According to McKenzie-Mohr (2010) the more a youth is exposed to a traumatizing event the less able they are to effectively recover from the event and build resiliency to future traumas. Not only does homelessness increase the likelihood of abuse, but it is also associated with stress, loneliness, and other experiences that can cause youth to have low self-esteem when compared to peers (Edidin, Ganim, Hunter & Karnik, 2000). This can ultimately lead to youth putting themselves in further abusive or at-risk situations.
Homeless youth are likely to give up on their education altogether. According to the National Coalition for Homeless (2014) 75% of homeless or runaway youth drop out of school before graduation. A likely reason for the high rate of drop out is due to experienced traumatic events. The number of stressful events reported by homeless youth is high, in fact some studies show that homeless students can identify at least 1 stressful event from their past (McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). The stressful events that homeless youth experience are numerous, wide-ranging and severe. Both males and females were exposed to violence before and after becoming homeless. As a result of violence, there was a high level of mental illnesses reported. In fact, over 50% of youth in this study reported experiencing severe negative effects because of the trauma.

During adolescence the brain is developing at a rapid rate. According to Edidin et al. (2012) there are numerous changes occurring in the brain of a teenager and because of such changes in both structure and function, there are greater consequences with regard to the environment that the adolescent is exposed to. The ever changing brain development explains adolescence impulsive behaviors, such as emotional outbursts, and poor decision making. Under normal circumstances, adults, such as teachers, parents, and other guardians assist youth with their decision making process. In cases where the adolescent might act impulsively the adult would step in as if to act as that part of the brain for the youth. In homeless youth, the idea of parent stepping in to regulate emotions or act as that rational side of the adolescent's brain might not be possible because of the stress that the homeless adult is under.

In fact, one of the most common stressful events among homeless youth includes issues with parents. For example, it has been found that many youth who are homeless have parents who have substance abuse problems, mental illnesses, and poor academic achievement
themselves (Buckner, Bassuk, & Weinreb, 2001). During a critical time period of brain
development when adults have the potential to help to act as the rational side of the brain for
youth, many homeless adolescents are left in the care of adults who do not have the capability of
doing so.

Often time’s children who are homeless have had adverse childhood experiences
(Bornstein, 2013). When a brain experiences change, loss, or a threat disruptive behavior ensues.
Homeless children will violate rules because they feel out of control. In a sense, it is a basic act
of survival intended to control a situation. Furthermore, many homeless youth do not have
positive role models who can act as this support and take over for these poor decision making
(Edidin, et al., 2012).

All of these compounding factors make it very difficult for a homeless student to come
out of a stressful home and enter a school environment without taking the stress with them. In
fact, one of the most common mental health disorders among homeless youth is PTSD.
According to Edidin et. al. (2012), one-quarter to one-third of all homeless youth meets criteria
for such a disorder. Rates of PTSD in the general population range from 6.3% to 7.8%
(Giaconia, et al., 1995). Furthermore, the rate of having such a psychiatric disorder for across a
lifetime is twice as high for homeless youth as compared with their housed counterparts (Edidin,
et al., 2012). Various factors have been found to contribute to adolescents developing PTSD
including, lack of sufficient parental care, abuse, both physical and sexual, conflict between
parents, and a parent's psychiatric disorder.

The affects of homelessness on academic performance, cognitive functioning, and mental
and physical health have been well documented throughout the literature. At the heart of the
issue is that homeless youth are at very high risk for developmental PTSD (Edidin, et al., 2012).
According to Anne Garity, Ph.D. LICSW, school counseling professor at the University of Minnesota, when stress persists, as it so often does for a child who is consistently homeless, it becomes unmanageable and children become overpowered (personal communication, May, 22 2014). In certain situations stress can be useful, for example, if the stress level is a fairly low amount it can actually motivate an individual to complete a task. However, in a case where an adult who is taking care of the youth is unable to regulate the stressful situation and bring back a sense of security and balance for a child this stress becomes intolerable and not useful.

According to Garity, if stress is matched to a child’s developmental stage and regulated with adult help children are able to rebound from such stress and regain a sense of well-being (personal communication, May, 22 2014). On the other hand, if a child experiences chronic, prolonged stress with no adult support or inconsistent adult support, this stress can change how the child perceives the information around them, how they function in school and how they will remember facts. Garity calls this type of stress, toxic stress. When a child is not able to manage their stress, as so often is the case for homeless youth, they become preoccupied with thoughts of imminent risk. This is when homeless youth are distressed and vulnerable and tend to “act out” in a school environment (communication, May, 22 2014).

Garity reported that after repeated exposure to stress, it is more likely that symptoms of mental illness start to occur (personal communication, May, 22 2014). Even if the stressful thing is removed from the child’s life the child may continue to struggle because a traumatic event has occurred in their past. The stressful effects of being homeless may be permanent because of the effects that trauma can have on the brain. During early adolescence the prefrontal cortex is growing at a rapid rate. This is the part of the brain responsible for decision making. Stress can stop the natural growth of the brain because it can increase the speed at which the prefrontal
cortex is growing (Edidin et al., 2012). Childhood and adolescence is a time of great need for adult support for any child because this is a time when the brain is at such a critical period of growth. Even when/if permanent housing is eventually found, the stress of being homeless in the first place is often times too much for the brain to overcome, thus the stress remains.

Children learn how to regulate their behavioral responses based on an ability to predict an adult's reaction (Edidin et al., 2012). If an adult is unable to deescalate a stressful situation for a child, that traumatic experience can become a source of distress for that child. A survey of 350 homeless youth from across the country reiterated the importance of family function with relation to post-traumatic stress symptoms (Thompson, Cochran, & Barczyk, 2012). Poor family communication as well as concerns about the family unit was found to directly relate to the youth developing PTSD. Children who have experienced trauma are two to four times more likely to have problems with attendance, behavior, academics, and health (Bornstein, 2013).

Children under constant stress become disruptive in the classroom both for themselves and eventually to other students around them. This trauma prevents them from being able to self regulate (become internally soothed) or stay in regulated state of mind (Thompson, Cochran, & Barczyk, 2012). Being in a constant state of stress will stop a student from learning new material. According to Juli Mongomery, former school counselor at Lucey Lanie, an elementary school with over 30% homelessness these children are coming to school with such a high rate of stress that they cannot simple be calmed down (personal communication, March 26 2014). They are constantly having little PTSD episodes.

Many homeless youth do not seek treatment for dealing with traumatic events because they do not have access to such services or because of their lack of trust with adults (Bender, Ferguson, Thompson, Komlo, & Pollio, 2010). In most cases it was an adult who put the child
through the traumatic event in the first place. In fact, on average only 18% of homeless youth seek psychological services at all (Toro, et al., 1999). This is a huge underutilization of services. One of the biggest barriers to overcoming life circumstances and building self resiliency is that so many homeless youth are leery of adult help and formal counseling.

Mental health is vital in order for children to learn. Alfred Adler asserted that children must have a sense of safety within their environment in order for them to feel a sense of well-being as well as a sense of significance (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). In order to learn in schools, children must first fulfill their basic human need for safety. Therefore, schools cannot separate social/emotional learning from other types of learning. Gearity expressed that if a child is expected to learn factual information a school needs to address any social/emotional issues that prevent them to do so prior to even beginning a teaching lesson (personal communication, May, 22, 2014). Problems with mental health are certainly a factor in learning problems, disruptive behavior patterns, as well as social troubles. It is not always enough to be understanding with children in trauma. Often times an adult needs to deal directly with these mental health needs through building resiliency in students. Focusing on a plan to recover after setbacks is the key to providing safe and healthy education for homeless youth.

**School Counselor’s Interventions**

While homelessness among youth is a significant problem little evidence based research has been done. McCay et al. (2001) studied the influence of relationship based intervention strategies with homeless youth. The study found that participants who received social connection based treatment reported less hopelessness post intervention compared with those that received only medical treatment. Building a relationship with a homeless student is the key to helping these students overcome the stressors in their life.
Many (68%) students who are homeless were able to identify at least one stressor in relation to being homeless (Menke, 2000). The majority of students who were homeless reported using some sort of coping skills to manage school. However, the type of social support utilized varied drastically compared with students who were never homeless. Significantly more students who were either previously homeless or never homeless identified using social support. Menke (2000) defined social support as seeking out another person when feelings of stress arose. Parents were found to be the most frequently sought after for social support, although this was significantly less for homeless students compared with students who were always housed. Furthermore, homeless students tended to approach teachers less frequently for social support. Thirty five percent of those who were never homeless used teachers for social support compared to only nine percent of homeless individuals. This suggests that there is a barrier for homeless students to access social support at school.

Adults have the potential to significantly adjust how a student views school. Garity asserted that there are three ways in which adults hold significance in a child’s life and can influence a child in times of trauma (personal communication, May, 22 2014). The first is through mediating stress. That is, an adult provides a sense of security through keeping the child out of dangerous situations; adults not only control how often a child is exposed to environmental stressors, but also help children recover a sense of balance after a stressful experience. Unfortunately, in many circumstances, children who are homeless do not have adults with a steady lifestyle in which they can provide them with a sense of security and safety. According to Juli Montgomery, former school counselor at Lucey Laney Elementary School in Minneapolis Minnesota (personal communication, March 26, 2014), when students do not experience an sufficient amount of adult resources to process the things that are difficult around
them, it results in an incredibly high level of stress. Montgomery adds “The adults around these kids are always operating out of a stressful mode, so that is constantly modeled to the students” (personal communication, March 26, 2014).

The second way in which adults aid children to ease stressful situations is by making sense of the experiences that children may have to stressful situations. Garity stated, “When children are exposed to threats or danger, adults make sense of these experiences in ways that help the child understand what happened so they can know what to do” (personal communication, May 22, 2014). One key element to making sense of a stressful situation is by first establishing a connection with the youth (McCay et al., 2001). It is through this relationship that the youth can learn to trust the adult. When a child does trust an adult they are more likely to allow that adult to help make sense of a stressful situation.

Last, Garity asserted that adults support children in their developmental processes (personal communication, May, 22 2014). Adults have the capacity to teach resilience as well as moderate stress. Coping has been described as a process of managing stress rather than a personality trait (Garcia, 2009). This suggests that the adults within a school have the power to support healthy resiliency in students. It is the job of a school counselor to help all school staff understand the stressors of a homeless student’s life (personal communication, March 26, 2014).

A major role of a school counselor is to plan and implement comprehensive school counseling programs that promote academic achievement for all students (American School Counselors Association, 2012). An effective school counselor collaborates between parents, teachers, and other school personnel in an effort to maximize an educational experience for students. Another task of a school counselor is to remove barriers so that students can function at their maximum potential (Erford, 2010). Strategies for removing such barriers for homeless
students include increasing awareness among professionals, promoting culture change, and creating a mentorship program.

One component of a school counselor’s mission is to support the mental health needs of students (Erford, 2010). A student who is homeless is in crisis (American School Counselor Association, 2009). Although a school counselor does not provide long term therapy for students with mental health needs, school counselors need to be prepared to recognize and respond to a student in crisis as well as train and support school staff to do the same. According to the Department of Education (2014), three fourths of all students who are homeless drop out of school. School counselors are essential school leaders in the prevention of drop outs as well as the promotion of mental health.

**Developmental Assets**

The Search Institute (1997) has identified 40 developmental skills that youth who become successful adults possess. These skill sets are divided into two different categories; external assets, which are environmental supports and internal assets, which are personal internal traits of the youth. Although school counselors do not have the power to change many of the circumstances for homeless youth, they do have the power to influence some aspects of their lives.

One quality that was identified was a caring school climate (Search Institute, 1997). If a school is able to convey to a youth a message of encouragement that youth will be much better off. A school counselor has the influence to adapt a school culture to be one that is caring and encouraging. Another skill that was identified was school boundaries. A school must provide clear rules and consequences and follow through with those on a consistent basis in order for youth to know what the boundaries and expectations are for them while in the school setting.
One more significant ability that was identified by the Search Institute was to have high expectations. If youth are aware that both teachers and parents expect and encourage the student to do well it is much more likely that the student will grow up to be a responsible, caring adult.

**Increasing Awareness**

Students who are homeless are more likely to underachieve in school settings that are designed for middle-class standards (Erford, 2010). School counselors have the power to change school culture as well as foster resiliency in students who are homeless (American School Counselor Association, 2009). A supportive school environment has the power to change how homeless students view education. Often times, families of students who are homeless do not put a priority on education (Erford, 2010). Therefore, students do not have adult models that are enlightening them on the importance of education. School counselors have the unique opportunity to be that role model for students as well as support teachers who strive to be examples of successful adults as well.

Training teachers and other school personnel about the barriers that homeless students face is the key to increasing awareness. Garity suggested that anytime school staffs attempt to minimize the impact that being homeless has on a student, the school is in danger of discouraging that student from academic success (personal communication, May 22, 2014). School counselors can challenge colleagues to examine their negative perceptions and predispositions about students who are homeless (Grothaus, Lorelle, Anderson, & Knight, 2011). Once a dialogue has been opened up regarding biases about homeless students school personnel can start to explore more effective teaching and communication methods.

Often times when a child engages in a disruptive behavior the reaction of the adult is the discipline that child (Bornstein, 2013). Research on trauma demonstrates the need for schools to
move away from such responses and towards a more caring and empathetic response. It is important for children who are homeless to learn how to calm themselves down. Although the trauma of being homeless can never be removed for these kids, overall stress can be decreased at school by creating choices in the classroom, and teaching teachers to use trauma-sensitive measures. Many schools have seen a decrease in behavioral referrals as well as an increase in staff morale because of building wide trauma sensitive trainings.

It is about creating a trauma-sensitive school environment so that children who are homeless feel safe (Bornstein, 2013). It is not good enough for a child to feel safe in a classroom; they must feel confident in the hallway, lunchroom, and other places. School counselors are the unique personnel who can educate all school faculties on understanding the traumatic circumstances of homeless youth (Daniels, 1995a). Counselors can enlighten teachers and school administrators not only on how to deal with disruptive behaviors, but also on how to draw out the strengths of homeless students.

School counselors must advocate for students who are homeless through administrative staff (Grothaus et al., 2011). School counselors should meet with the school principal to discuss the needs and concerns of this special population as well as change school policies and procedures out of line with creating a trauma-sensitive school environment (Daniels, 1995a). Counselors can use the school principal as a means of advocating for this at-risk group. It is essential that school administrators help to create a trauma-sensitive school environment. It is about helping the entire school staff to understand the learning obstacles experienced by children who are homeless. Consulting with teachers and administration in an effort to increase awareness and sensitivity has been shown to help the climate of the classrooms and overall school environment (Daniels, 1995a).
Homeless students reported feeling discouraged about their own academic performance (Daniels, 1992). Teachers and counselors must work together in order to promote academic success for all students (American School Counselors Association, 2012). It may be necessary for teachers to modify teaching strategies in order to fulfill the needs of a homeless student (Gothaus, Lorelle, Anderson, & Knight, 2011). A teacher may also need to alter the climate of the classroom in order to de-stress a homeless student rather than take a disciplinary approach to disruptive behaviors (Daniels, 1992). It is important for school counselors to train teachers and school staff on proper ways to de-escalate a student experiencing trauma in order to promote the dignity of the homeless student (Bornstein, 2013). The point is not to allow the traumatized student to avoid tasks, but rather to get them to calm their bodies and be present in school both mentally and emotionally.

**Mentorship Program**

One developmental asset that helps youth to become responsible adults is through healthy adult relationships (Search Institute, 1997). When a young person who has experienced trauma is involved with three or more adult relationships they are more likely to have a healthy, caring, and responsible attitude. At the cornerstone of resiliency are quality mentor relationships (McCay et al., 2001). Even brief meetings between mentor and mentee can hold enough power to change a student’s outlook on school. A successful mentorship program must be long-term. If the program is too short of a time span students who are homeless feel abandoned, which exasperates any insecure feelings of the student. Mentors must be properly trained by school counselors on effective ways to deal with students who are homeless.

Daniels (1992) found that when working with students who are homeless it is especially important to build a relationship. By establishing mentorship programs with adults to work
individually with students a deeper connection can be made between a mentor and the student (Pawlas, West, Brookes, & Russell, 1994). An effective way in which to begin a relationship is by assessing a student’s needs and strengths. School counselors should train mentors on effective strategies to building trusting relationships (Erford, 2010). Students are more likely to share personal feelings and concerns with adults when they do not have a sense of embarrassment or shame about their situation (Daniels, 1992).

One example of a successful mentorship program was in central Florida where a community rallied to increase awareness among the leadership, share a common vision, and put their concerns into action (Pawlas, West, Brookes, & Russell, 1994). Each student was matched with a volunteer who acted as a tutor, mentor, resource, and advocate. The volunteers were trained to provide support as well as resources to families in need. Each student and family got access to needed services that provided clothing and food. The students also received weekly tutoring sessions which took place in the neighboring missions. The results of this communitywide effort were a marked school improvement by the students involved. The homeless students realized that there were adults who cared about their success.

Another example of an effective mentorship program was in Phoenix Arizona (Woods, 1996). Again, community members were matched up with students. Each member was required to fill out background checks as well as attend a 2 hour orientation session. The leader of this program, Kathie Shergalis, informed the mentors of the variety of differences that exist between homeless students and typical students of that age. Most students did not have a role model. The goal of the mentorship program was to provide stability in a child’s life that needed it. The mentors met with their students two hours each month to listen, talk, play games, and help with school work. Mentors in the program took the students to work with them in order for students to
experience the real-world. Over time, this program became a large part of the school culture. Students began to talk about their mentors in class. Students recognized the mentors around school and even mentioned them as being part of this program. The mentors were a positive influence on the homeless students.

Programs like these are proof that with a little encouragement to look ahead and plan for the future, at-risk youth who are homeless can reach academic success. Mentors enhance the educational experience a student has (Grothaus et al., 2011). Montgomery stated that in her experience mentors provide homeless youth with the stability and predictability that they crave (personal communication, March 26, 2014).

Not only are mentors important for the youth directly involved in the program, but also for the families of these youth. It is extremely important that a representative from the school open up and maintain the lines of communication between school and family (Strawser et al., 2000). The mentor might have valuable information about resources that a family could use. It is essential that the mentor at least attempt to make contact with the student’s family in order to maximize the results of the relationship.

**Direct Facilitation**

School counselors can facilitate homeless students by meeting with them directly (Daniels, 1995a). It is important that school counselors meet with homeless students individually in an effort to build a relationship (Strawser et al., 2000). Individual counseling provides useful ways of managing the stress of living in a shelter, disappointment, fear, changing family relationships, and other pressures that go along with being homeless (Walsh, & Buckley, 1994). Through individual counseling a school counselor can identify and address particular concerns that a homeless child might have.
Groton, Teasley, and Canfield (2013) found that good communication with the school was the strongest predictor of students feeling supported in school performance. Many homeless students are transient with housing and thus move school districts frequently (Strawser, Markos, Yamaguhi, & Higgins, 2000). Because curriculum varies from school to school communication between the school and the homeless student and family is critical (Walsh, & Buckley, 1994). Practical steps, such as providing a homeless student with a school orientation on the first day can be a useful tool in getting to know a student (Strawser et al., 2000). After an initial meeting, a school counselor can act as an on-going liaison between the school and the family (Strawser et al., 2000).

In an attempt to build a positive relationship with family members a school counselor might recommend community services to the family (Strawser et al., 2000). It is essential that school counselors recognize that homeless families do not have financial resources. Papacek highly recommended giving information on public assistance programs in order to help families understand that you as a counselor are on their side (personal communication, April 4, 2014). It is good practice for a school to set up a snack cart, clothing closets, and other food programs to meet the basic needs of homeless students (Strawser, et al., 2000). In an effort to minimize the stigma that homeless students feel it is important that a school offer these services to the entire school community rather than target the students in this population directly.

**Interview Summary**

For the purposes of this paper I interviewed two school counselors and a social worker that have extensive experience working with youth who are homeless. One theme that continued to surface was the idea that for children who are homeless there is no stability. Dan Papacek, Social worker at Battle Creek Middle School reported “They need basic things like clothing.
They need things like seeing that someone cares and buys them a uniform or pays for a meal. An adult that gives these kids as much stability and compassion as possible always helps them to not only know someone cares, but can fulfill basic needs for that youth as well” (personal communication, April 4, 2014). Gearity suggested that in order for a student to be mentally healthy they need stability and that is something that students who are homeless are lacking (personal communication, May 22, 2014).

Schools are a unique setting that can provide homeless children an environment that provides stability. Gearity stated that access to environments that are predictably structured and reliable is one major way to increase resiliency in a homeless child’s life (personal communication, May 22, 2014). Papacek asserted that homeless students are constantly worried about shelter, food, and clothing (personal communication, April 4, 2014). Schools are a constant setting that provides children with food and shelter during the day so that this is the one place they do not have to worry about getting their basic needs met. Gearity agreed with this sentiment when she stated that the key to helping children thrive in a school environment is to provide a predictable school setting with steadfast adults so that they can feel effective (personal communication, May 22, 2014).

Another matter that the professionals brought up was the idea of stress. Montgomery said when children do not have enough adult resources around them to process things that are difficult; there is a high level of stress produced in the body (personal communication, March 26, 2014). Often times, adults that are homeless are modeling a fight or flight response to stress rather than modeling healthier coping methods. Homeless students tend to lack the ability to respond from a rational place so in the context of school the personnel are constantly working in crisis mode to calm these kids down. Gearity asserted that for homeless students their sense of
safety and security is threatened on a daily basis and this constantly puts them in a state of stress (personal communication, May 22, 2014).

Gearity is working with Minneapolis schools in an effort to lower what she calls toxic stress (personal communication, May 22, 2014). She stated “Stressed children become dysregulated and, without adult help, often find ways to self-right that are maladaptive or that prevent ongoing learning.” Montgomery agreed with this notion when she stated it is important that help is provided on a daily basis because these children are experiencing the traumas in the here and now (personal communication, March 26, 2014). School personnel have the chance to reduce stressors and provide sensitive, direct instruction. Success in school is measured by a child feeling secure enough to join in group learning and use teachers to master new learning.

Gearity noticed that when children who are stressed are unable to learn and disrupt other’s learning as well (personal communication, May 22, 2014). Homeless students have no coping mechanisms to manage their own stress, so adults must do it for them. The challenge for the teachers is to support the students in a positive, encouraging, instructive and patient manner. Teachers must constantly be mindful of children becoming stressed while at school. Gearity accounted “When learning is compromised because children lack pre-learning abilities -- such as regulation, organization, attention, social monitoring, negotiation, curiosity, motivation, perseverance and tenacity -- schools must repair these prerequisites for complex learning and remediate age reasonable coping skills.”

One thing that counselors can do to decrease stress and increase resiliency is to provide stability and be a reliable caring adult in the child’s life (A. Gearity, personal communications, May 22, 2014). It is important for counselors and teachers alike to recognize the stressful effects that being homeless has on students (J. Montgomery, personal communication, March 26, 2014).
Schools that minimize the impact that homelessness has on children perpetuate the problem rather than reduce stress (A. Gearity, personal communication, May 22, 2014). Providing children with reliable adult company is critical to their overall school success (D. Papacek, personal communication, April 4, 2014). It is extremely important that all school personnel act as reliable, predictable people. Teachers and other staff must realize what the child is experiencing and help a homeless child feel as secure as they can in difficult situations (A. Gearity, personal communication, May 22, 2014).

**Adlerian Perspective**

Most students who were homeless reported that the biggest stressor in their life was not having a home (Menke, 2000). Adler would suggest that a lack of security leads to problems on the most basic level of mental health (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). A lack of home leads children to constantly stress about their future (Menke, 2000). Children who have been homeless for prolonged periods of time have an even less sense of security. As a result of unpredictability and constant insecurity there is a lack of aspiration (Donahue, 1995). Their basic level of need for safety has not been met, therefore various other psychological issues surface.

Adler believed that happiness stems from a sense of significance. Adler thought of all living things to be interconnected, thus every person strives for significance in this world. A person who is imbedded in the social world and contributing to the happiness of others will in turn experience a significant amount of happiness compared to someone who is isolated from the social world. Homeless youth are often denied this sense of feeling a part of a community. As a result of not developing a sense of community early on in life, the self confidence of the homeless student suffers.
Adler maintained that the strongest desire of any human-being is to feel a sense of belonging (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). Humans are social beings and rely on each other for survival. For many homeless students, fulfilling this need to belong is something almost impossible to achieve. Many homeless students move from school to school (Daniels, 1995b). It is difficult to make a group of social friends when constantly moving schools, which leads to a lowered self-esteem.

Furthermore, life for homeless children is severely stressful because of a lack of protection of a social network (Zima et al., 1999). Not only is there a lack of residential stability, but there are few social supports. Homeless students reported feeling embarrassed about their circumstances; in fact, many reported not sharing this information with peers at school (Walsh, & Buckley, 1994). Many students are reluctant to even go to school out of fear that other students will find out that they are homeless. Self reports from homeless youth have demonstrated the outcomes that moving from school to school has had on self-esteem (Walsh, & Buckley, 1994). There is a sense that they are different from their peers because they cannot afford an apartment or a house, let alone keep up with the latest clothing trends.

Over time, when a child experiences a sense of belonging they will form social interest (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). That is, a community feeling, or a strong desire to participate on the useful side of life (Griffith & Powers, 2007). Contributing to society through social interest improves a person’s mental health (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). Feeling at home is an essential component of developing social interest (Griffith & Powers, 2007). Children who do not have homes do not have a sense that they belong in any peer group. Interviews with children who are homeless provide evidence of such feelings. Walsh & Buckley (1994) found that children who are homeless often attempt to maintain the secrecy surrounding their situation by
keeping their distance from peers and teachers. One girl admitted that anyone who attempted to play with her was shoved away. Children who are homeless lack a sense of belonging, which can prevent them from developing social interest.

A child who has been denied a sense of belonging must adopt a new strategy for survival (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). For a homeless child it is likely that they adopt an idea that they are less worthwhile. Adler called this sense of self inferiority feelings. As a result of having inferiority feelings, many youth are easily misguided and influenced by unhealthy individuals. Youth who have inferiority feelings are more likely to have behavioral issues in school because they lack a sense of belonging and significance.

An Adlerian perspective seeks to understand an individual by examining the social context they are in (Ansbacher, & Ansbacher, 1956). Children first learn a sense of who they are from the context of their family environment. Any feelings of inferiority are strived to be overcome within the family environment. In many cases, homeless youth do not have stable environments to grow up in (Buckner, 2008). As a result youth strive to overcome inferiority feelings by seeking significance through behavior that is purposeful (Griffith & Powers, 2007). All behaviors are purposeful. Homeless youth are attempting to move towards a position of significance and belonging and away from any feelings of inferiority.

According to Dreikurs (1990), a misbehaved child is a discouraged child. Children who are homeless are discouraged when it comes to schoolwork. This is clearly evidenced in schools that educate students who are homeless. According to Strawser et al. (2000), children living in shelters were one-and-one-half more likely to have behavioral problems compared with peers who are housed. Interviews with homeless students verify feelings of discouragement. Many youth reported feeling inadequate compared to other students (Walsh, & Buckley, 1994). Some
even admitted that school became too difficult so they gave up trying (Grothaus et al., 2011). Dreikurs (1990) would suggest that these children are operating out of the misbehavior of assumed inadequacy. Many of these students do not feel a sense of belonging so they develop this goal of misbehavior. They are seeking to be left alone because they have given up on any idea of school success.

Positive change comes from encouragement that adults can provide (Dreikurs, 1990). A positive and trusting relationship with an adult can make a huge impact on a homeless child’s life. Krabbenborg, Boersma, & Wolf (2013) found that in order to have success with homeless youth, adults must first establish a trusting relationship. It is vital that all personnel who work with the homeless are trained to help youth feel a sense of security, safety and a sense of belonging. It is through building a connection with an adult that youth are able to achieve their goals. This can be achieved through a strength based approach.

It is important for school counselors to remember that behavior is purposeful and not personal (Dreikurs, 1990). It is also vital that counselors impart this knowledge onto all teachers and other school personnel working with homeless youth. Because research has provided evidence that building a relationship with homeless youth is an essential component to developing their sense of self, it is important to first build rapport with the students (Edidin et al., 2012). It is essential to help students to find their own personal strengths as a way of encouragement. Adler would suggest that by focusing on the student’s strengths feelings of discouragement subside (Dreikurs, 1990).

**Implications for School Counselors**

Professional school counselors should be familiar with the influence that being homeless has on a child’s mental and physical health as well as academic functioning (American School
Counselor Association, 2010). A major function of a school counselor is to collaborate with advocates in an effort to remove barriers to academic success for all students. School counselors should work to implement educational programs to promote successful school performance. Counselors should work to encourage a positive relationship between the student who is homeless and the school environment.

When working with students who are homeless it is important for school counselors to assess the needs as well as the areas of strengths for each individual student (Daniels, 1995b). An effective strategy for school counselors is to begin to work individually with students in order to build a relationship based on trust. Students are more likely to share feelings of concern and needs when they do not have a sense of shame or embarrassment. It is essential to ensure that basic needs are taken care of first, such as making certain the students has been fed or is clothed properly. Once basic needs are met, a more in depth exploration of need can be taken into account. A full list of ways in which school counselors can provide support for homeless youth is provided below:

- All children who are homeless have a legal right to free and appropriate education.
- School counselors should identify homeless students in order to begin the process of removing barriers to educational success.
- Develop a data-collection system for gathering information on academic placement by obtaining previous school records, which can be accomplished through either the parents of the students or shelters.
- Begin advocacy process by meeting with the students individually in an effort to build a relationship.
- Assess basic needs by learning what each individual child needs as far as services are concerned.
- When possible meet the homeless child’s basic physiological needs.
- Help set up homeless students with participation in school hot meal programs.
- Provide free snacks during individual or group meetings.
- Consult with the school nurse to set up health screenings.
- Link student’s parents with local health services that provide free services.
- Initiate a school-based orientation program for entry into a new school to foster a sense of belonging.
- Design individual meetings, guidance lessons, and group meetings designed to increase a sense of self-esteem.
- Provide referrals to parents, such as parenting skills classes, appropriate community counseling services, free health services, and other community services offered for free
- Develop and maintain an open line of communication with parents and other family members
- Develop a relationship with other important persons, such as local law enforcement, community shelters, and other members in the community offering services that are gratis.
- Help children who are homeless develop a sense of belonging in the school environment in an effort to foster a sense of belonging, which ultimately will lead to better self-esteem.
- Foster a stable, predictable environment by providing direct services to students who are homeless.
• Train teachers and other school personnel on the life stressors of homeless students.

• Provide in-service trainings for all school personnel on issues affecting children who are homeless.

• Foster positive school culture by improving awareness on homeless students.

• Establish a mentorship program to match at-risk homeless students with teachers who will provide stability and predictability.

Summary

Homelessness is a significant and increasing problem in this country. Families that include children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population (National Coalition for Homeless, 2014). In fact, it is estimated that more than 1.35 million children experience homelessness (Grothaus et al., 2011). Students who are homeless are more likely to miss school, drop out of school, repeat grades, and have developmental delays (Buckner, 2008; Gewirtz, et al., 2008). The Mckinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Act requires that each state ensures that homeless children have equal access to appropriate public education (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The quality and means by which schools provide this educational experience varies. School counselors can advocate for students through collaboration with parents/guardians, teachers, and other school personnel in an effort to reduce barriers surrounding school enrollment and success (American School Counselors Association, 2010).

The needs of homeless students are extensive. It is important that the most basic physiological needs of food, protection, and basic health care must be met before an individual can fulfill other human needs, such as safety, love, belonging, self-esteem and self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). In addition to not having basic needs met, homeless children are much more
likely to experience stress and trauma (Whitbeck, & Simons, 1990). In children, this stress comes at a time of rapid brain development, which exacerbates the problems (Edidin et al., 2012).

Adults, in particular school counselors, have the power to have a significant impact of the lives of homeless children. School counselors can improve the educational career of students who are homeless by changing the culture of the school. Counselors have the unique leadership role to be able to consult with all school personnel. By bringing the issue of homelessness to light teachers and other school administrators become more aware of how their actions influence students who are homeless. School counselors might also work to implement mentorship programs in order to provide adult role models for homeless students as well as provide at-risk youth emotional support.

**Conclusion**

Professional school counselors have the unique role of providing awareness and understanding of the variety of issues that homeless students face (American School Counselors Association, 2010). It is essential that school counselors collaborate with students, parents/guardians, and other community stakeholders to facilitate students who are homeless to overcome barriers to academic and personal/social success. One special population that requires the aid of a school counselor is homeless youth.

Homeless youth have a variety of needs ranging from basic physiological requirements to needing adult role models. School counselors are in the position to alter school culture in order to provide these needs to students who are homeless. Many children who are homeless are in a constant state of stress and therefore exhibit behaviors similar to PTSD (A. Gearity personal communication, May, 22 2014). By making school personnel aware of the struggles that homeless children go through the adults in the building come to a deeper understanding of the
purpose of the behaviors that these children might be exhibiting. School counselors can also initiate a mentorship program in an effort to provide stability, structure, and a positive role model to the lives of these at-risk youth. Having a caring adult in the life of a child who has experienced trauma can have great influence on not only their educational life, but also their emotional well-being.
References


