

Homeless Children & Academic Achievement:  
What Do Adults Who Experienced Homelessness  
As Children Believe Teachers Can Do To Ensure  
Their Homeless Students Achieve Academic Success?

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### Abstract

This qualitative research examined what adults who experienced homelessness as children believe teachers can do to ensure their homeless students achieve academic success. Objectives of the study was to interview participants who experienced homelessness as children, report on recent research regarding academics and homeless children, and suggest ideas to assist students in achieving academic success. Interviews were conducted with three adult participants who experienced homelessness as children. Results of the interviews were interpreted through thematic analysis to isolate identifying themes. Five themes were identified within the participants' interviews: Lack of Compassion/Need for Compassion, Lack of Friends, A Lot of Change in Living Situations/Schools, Effects on Student's Academics, and Need for Intervention. The participants' interviews revealed the following findings to what they believe teachers can do to ensure students' academic success: be more involved in student's home life, get to know your students, do not stereotype, have compassion for your students, provide students with reading material, provide family literacy activities, understand they have a lot of adult worries, and allow more flexibility with schoolwork. Participants were in agreement there needs to be intervention for these students to succeed, and that with intervention homeless students can achieve success.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Chapter 1.....	5
Background of the Study.....	5
Problem Statement.....	6
Significance of the Problem.....	7
Study Approach.....	8
Purpose.....	8
Rationale.....	9
Summary.....	10
Chapter 2: Literature Review.....	11
Statistics and the McKinney-Vento Act.....	11
Issues/Concerns Related to Homelessness.....	13
What Does Previous Research Indicate Educators Can Do.....	16
Summary of Literature Review.....	18
Chapter 3: Study Design.....	20
Introduction.....	20
Methods and Procedures.....	20
Participants.....	21
Meet the Participants.....	21
Nina.....	22
Megan.....	23
Valerie.....	24
Positionality of the Researcher.....	25
Data Collecting/Setting.....	26
Procedures.....	26
Analysis of the Data.....	27
Limitations.....	27
Chapter 4: Results.....	27
Theme 1: Lack of Compassion/Need for Compassion.....	28

Theme 2: Lack of Friends.....31

Theme 3: A Lot of Change in Living Situations/Schools.....32

Theme 4: Effects on Academic Achievement.....33

Theme 5: Need for Intervention.....35

Summary of Themes.....37

Analysis.....39

Chapter 5: Conclusions.....41

    Though Homelessness Was Experienced at Different Ages, There Were Common Experiences.....41

    As Research States, Multiple Schools Were Attended.....42

    Administrations Need for Awareness and Compassion for Students’ Situations.....42

    Participants Agree There is a Need for Intervention.....42

Implications.....43

    Finding a Way to Help Make Sure These Kids Succeed.....43

    Get to Know Your Kids and Talk to Them.....44

    Homelessness Should Never Be Considered an Excuse.....44

Overall Significance of the Study.....45

References.....48

Appendix A.....50

Appendix B.....53

**List of Tables**

Participants’ Statistics.....22

## Chapter 1

With statistics identifying 1 in 30 children homeless annually (America's Youngest, 2015), only 25% or less of those children completing high school (Murphy & Tobin, 2011), and the number of homeless children on the rise yearly, it is imperative that teachers take a closer look at what strategies they can use to help these students achieve academic success. The growing numbers of homeless families in the United States are difficult to record due to their high mobility and are the fastest growing group of homeless persons (Homeless Families, 2009). Children who are homeless are facing diverse situations that affect their development on various levels, which is of increasing concern when many of these children are homeless during their developmental years. Homeless students face nutritional, social, psychological, and health issues, which all effect their academic performances. Homeless students' nutritional, social, psychological, and health issues need to be understood by the educators who are teaching these students for better understanding of how educators might assist their students in succeeding.

### Background of the Study

While researchers have produced considerable amounts of research with regards to homeless children and academics I have not been able to find research that specifically involves interviewing adults who have experienced homelessness as children. I searched various databases such as Academic OneFile, Academic Search Complete, Education Source, ERIC, WorldCat, and PsycInfo. I utilized prompts such as homeless, homelessness, children, homeless children, academic, adolescent, transient, diverse, adults, educators, success, academic achievement, shelters, motels, children living in motels, adults who grew up homeless, and the McKinney-Vento Act, all in hopes up finding information or interviews that specifically pertained to adults who had grown up homeless, and information that would assist me with my

research regarding homeless children. Unable to locate specific research or interviews, other than a few personal memoirs written by adults who had experienced homelessness as children, I directed my research toward locating adults who had experienced homelessness as children. By inquiring with adults who have experienced the diversities that come with being homeless and trying to sustain their academic achievements I was able to gain a clearer insight as to some of the difficulties that homeless children face.

### **Problem Statement**

The McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001, subtitle VII-B, was written to ensure that each state's educational agency ensures that homeless children, including preschool children, receive the same free and appropriate public education as is provided to children whose families are permanently housed (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003). Providing these children the opportunity to receive the same education is a start but often the absenteeism for many of these children is an ongoing challenge. Attendance is extremely important for these students because often school is the only stable environment in their daily lives (Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins, 1997). Living in unstable circumstances creates other challenges academically for homeless students: where to complete homework assignments, particularly if a computer is required, lack of privacy, lack of a quiet room to study and read in order to concentrate, and lack of school supplies in order to complete assignments. While the McKinney-Vento Act helps to guarantee homeless students the same education as housed students, it does not help to provide these students with the necessary tools or strategies they need to succeed academically. With the growing numbers of homeless children facing educators there has been an increase in research on implications for educators (Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins) and a response to the impact of homelessness on children (Buckner, 2008), but there is limited research that has dealt with what

educators can specifically do to help these children. As educators we need to discover ways to help these students. Educators need strategies and tools that can assist these learners in the challenges and diversities that they face daily so that we can see them succeed and the number of homeless children graduating from high school can grow.

### **Significance of the Problem**

Statistics show that over 1.35 million children experience homelessness in the United States every year (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003) with more people homeless now than during the Great Depression (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). With housing options limited for the homeless there is often a lot of transient movement between living quarters which in turn causes movement between schools. Statistics show that 41% of homeless children attend two different schools in a school year, while 28% attend three or more schools in a single school year (Julianelle & Foscarinis). The McKinney-Vento Act allows homeless children to attend public schools without having to constantly transfer as they move residency. This was an important foundation of the McKinney Act, when it was reauthorized in 2001, because consistent mobility in children's lives affects their academic achievement (Julianelle & Foscarinis).

Recent research suggests that 75% of homeless children in the United States are reading below grade level (Walker-Dalhousie & Risko, 2008). This same research suggests that educators may actually be hindering students' literacy development due to schools and educators being unprepared to teach homeless students who are enrolled in their schools (Walker-Dalhousie & Risko). My research addressed specific methods and ideas that educators can use to promote success in their students who are facing homelessness as suggested by adults who have experienced living in these conditions as children.

## **Study Approach**

The approach of this study was qualitative in nature. I conducted this study through use of previous research conducted concerning the academic achievement of students who have contended with a lifestyle that was transient in nature. In addition to the use of previous research I conducted additional research which included interviewing adults who experienced homelessness as children to hopefully gain a better perspective on, or more direct perspective, as to how these children might be helped academically. The idea behind this was that the adults who I interviewed have grown to become successful adults and can look back at their childhoods and possibly provide some insight as to how teachers were able to help them, or what teachers could have done to assist them further. Speaking with individuals who have experienced homelessness as children, combined with previous research, I hope to provide educators with an in-depth view at what their students contend with, as transient students, so that they might provide them with the greatest opportunities available to succeed.

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to interview adults who experienced homelessness as children and investigate what educators today can do to help ensure academic success in their students who are experiencing situations of homelessness or that of a transient nature. Through the use of previous research and interviews, with adults who experienced homelessness as children, I hoped to gain a more intimate insight and a better understanding that will assist educators with possible concepts of what educators might do in order to assist their students who are facing these diversities so they might succeed academically.

**Rationale**

As an educator, who is currently a substitute teacher, I see many different students on a daily and yearly basis rather than managing one classroom of 25 students a year. In the past three years I have noticed many students who either fit the criteria of homeless or are nearing the point of becoming homeless, based on living in motels or living with family members, or moving from one household to another. Living and working in a relatively small community it is surprising to hear how many students are facing this type of lifestyle. It seems that no community is immune to homelessness, regardless of size, community outlook, or overall wealth of the community. When the Great Depression hit there was mass homelessness across the United States (Basic Facts, 2015), and yet today we are actually reaching numbers that are greater than that dark time in our nation's history (Basic Facts). According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (Henry, 2013) it was estimated that in January of 2013, on a single night in the United States 610,042 people were homeless. With numbers this great we need to make sure that our children are receiving the finest education that we can provide in order for our future families to be able to rebound with stable living conditions. My personal interest in this topic is due to the fact that I spent four years as a homeless child, from the age of 13 to 17. I know how difficult it was for me and my younger sister, who is six years younger than myself. That said, I believe there are ways that we can assist these students in achieving success. Our children today are quite literally our future and we need to invest in them today in order to secure our future. By taking an in-depth look at the research, interviewing individuals who have personally experienced diverse childhoods that included homelessness and grew up to lead successful lives as adults, we might be able to use this information to better understand how we can help educate the students we teach every day.

## Summary

Homeless families are hitting record numbers in the United States with many of the children in these families facing homelessness during their developmental years when it can negatively affect their growth physically, mentally, and academically (Homeless Families, 2009). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 2001 was written to help ensure that students receive the same free and appropriate education as students who are housed (Julianne & Foscarinis, 2003). Although these students are able to receive the same education, they are still facing diverse living situations that affect their education and learning. They are often living in unstable circumstances, sometimes moving regularly between locations, causing excessive absenteeism (Yamagushi, Strawser & Higgins, 1997). Due to the hardships faced by these students, educators need strategies and tools that can assist these students with the challenges they face. With over 1.35 million children experiencing homelessness every in the United States (Julianne & Foscarinis) and recent research suggesting that 75% of homeless children in the United States are reading below grade level (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008), teachers need to be aware of methods that are available to utilize for their students.

This research was conducted in a qualitative nature using previous research and interviewing three adults, who experienced homelessness as children, in order to provide some insight to assist educators in helping their homeless students succeed.

With the current changes occurring in curriculum and advances that have happened in the past twenty years technologically, it is essential that we keep students on a steady track educationally in order for them to succeed academically. If we want our children today to be successful then we need to look at what they need in the future in order to become successful adults. While many children today are facing diverse living situations educators need to learn

what they can do to provide them, and their parents, the guidance to continue to achieve positive performance within their academics.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Homeless children face many diverse experiences daily that challenge their ability to succeed in many ways, one of those being academically. This literature review discusses the statistics on homelessness, including the definition of homelessness and the development and progress of the McKinney-Vento Act. Issues that are typically encountered by homeless children, such as health problems, health/nutritional issues, developmental problems, psychological/social problems, and academic problems are discussed in this literature. Finally, the literature discusses what educators have found to be of assistance to homeless students toward their academic support.

### **Statistics and the McKinney-Vento Act**

With families becoming one of the fastest growing of the subdivisions of the homeless population (Homeless Families, 2009), one of the most concerning issues is that of the children of these families (Homeless Families). According to United States Census Data and recent United States Department of Education's count of homeless children enrolled in U.S. public schools 2,483,539 children experienced homelessness in the U.S. in 2013, representing approximately 1 in every 30 children in the United States (America's Youngest, 2015). Over the course of the years, with the numbers of homeless children growing to such staggering numbers, and the negative effects and barriers that can impact their educational opportunities, the United States government began to take a closer look at what could be done to provide support to these students (Education of Homeless, 2007). In 1987, Congress established the McKinney Act's

Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) in response to reports received that only 57% of homeless children were enrolled in school. This program provided grants to state educational agencies to assist in ensuring that all homeless children receive the same free, appropriate education that was being provided to other children (Education of Homeless). Funds from the McKinney Act were used by state agencies to review and revise laws, practices, and policies that may be acting as barriers to homeless children, in effect, keeping them from attending school (Education of Homeless). Two forms of funding that were supported with grant money were local educational agencies (LEA), which assist with outreach, enrollment and placement, school supplies, and state educational agency (SEA), funding which assists with awareness for educators, educational materials for statewide distribution, service providers, parents, and students (Education of Homeless). According to the U.S. Department of Education, evaluations of the EHCY program reported to Congress that 87% of homeless children were enrolled in school, a substantial increase; however, the report also indicated that many barriers still remained (Education of Homeless). Some of the barriers included mobility of family, lack of school supplies, poor health, lack of food, and clothing (Education of Homeless). An effort was made to address those barriers with the 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act; however, not all of these concerns have been able to be addressed due to lack of funding (Education of Homeless). What the McKinney-Vento Act does provide is a definition, stating that children and youth who “lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” are considered homeless (McKinney-Vento, 2008). This could include children sharing housing with others due to loss of housing, living in a motel, campground, emergency or transitional shelter, cars, or abandoned buildings (McKinney-Vento). According to the McKinney-Vento Act homeless students are to be given the same academic achievement standards that all students are

expected to meet, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Due to homeless children typically having high mobility, which negatively impacts their academics, the McKinney-Vento has in place that Local Educational Agencies (LEAs) must keep students in their home school district (meaning the district they were enrolled in before they became homeless), unless their parent or guardian wishes otherwise (McKinney-Vento). This is an important section of the McKinney-Vento Act because according to the National Coalition for the Homeless, not only is changing schools a disruption to children, but some estimates state that 3-6 months of education can possibly be lost with every move that is made (Education of Homeless, 2007). Barriers such as delays in enrollment from lack of immunization records, birth certificates, school records, etc. are protected by the McKinney-Vento Act. Under the McKinney-Vento Act LEAs are required to ensure enrollment of students while these records are obtained, so there is minimal loss of academic participation (McKinney-Vento). Students experiencing homelessness are also guaranteed transportation through the McKinney-Vento Act, to confirm their ability to attend school daily. The reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act in 2001 has attempted to address the barriers that keep homeless children from attending school.

### **Issues/Concerns Related to Homelessness**

With homelessness on the rise in the United States issues and concerns are in abundance. According to Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins (1997) the majority of homeless families are single-parent headed by the mother, with numbers reading as high as 90%. The effects of the children in these families can be extreme with problems ranging from nutritional and developmental to emotional and psychological. This raises additional concerns in the classroom for teachers. According to Willard & Kulinna (2012), 75% of homeless children in the United States are reading below grade level, 36% of homeless children have needed to repeat a grade,

and homeless children have been found to have double the learning disabilities and triple the emotional and behavioral issues compared to their counterparts, children with stable homes (Willard & Kulinna). Research indicates that children living in such circumstances as homelessness often lack basic necessities, such as proper nutrition and rest, which may have negative effects on academic performance (Willard & Kulinna). Often it is left to the district and teachers to assist in providing basic needs for their students who are homeless (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). The classroom environment is often the only stable atmosphere that many of these children have that is a constant support system, and that responsibility falls on the educators to provide (Knowlton, 2006). According to an article by Titus (2007), one of the challenges that students face that live a life of mobility, such as homelessness, is having a sense of rootlessness and finding a personal identity. Titus also states that in the educational community there seems to be a lack of awareness and sensitivity with regards to these children and their needs.

In 2010 Pelosi, a veteran filmmaker decided to spend a summer at six motels and document the lives of a small number of chosen families and their children in Orange County, California. The purpose of this documentary was to shed some light on the nomadic lives that these children are living with their families daily in which Pelosi referred to as “tragic” (Johnson, 2010). This documentary takes the viewer into the one room motel room, being shared by a six member family, and allows the viewer to see what obstacles these families face living under such circumstances. What Pelosi finds is “working” poor families, not those on welfare. Parents who are nurses, fast-food workers, and Disneyland parking attendants (Johnson). These families are living in motels where there are signs posted for hourly rates. These families are living where there are gangs and drugs (Pelosi, 2010). What the viewer sees in the documentary is that most of the parents are determined and are working to build a better life for their families, and want

more for their children. The areas these children are growing up in are not safe. They are witness to drug usage and violence. One child attended his mother's boyfriend's funeral because the boyfriend was beaten to death (Pelosi). Throughout her documentary Pelosi poses questions to some of the children, such as asking one child, "What is home to you?" The answer she received was, "I don't know what that means."

Unlike many homeless children, the children who Pelosi documented attended school regularly. In the Orange County area there is a school called Project Hope School which is funded specifically for homeless students. As one teacher from Project Hope stated, "We understand if you come to school wearing the same clothes. No one is going to make fun of you," (Pelosi, 2010). The school provides students transportation to and from school daily. Students are also provided with two meals a day, breakfast and lunch. If a child moves, arrangements are made for the bus to pick them up at their new location. This prevents the constant changing of schools that so many homeless children experience. They also have clothing exchange available, where children are able to find additional clothing, if needed. All of the children attending Project Hope School are homeless, therefore, no one is looked down upon but rather as equals (Pelosi).

The families who Pelosi documented are working families with children, living in motels. One mother stated, "Even though we're in the ghetto, we don't have to act like we're in the ghetto." Another mother's words were, "What happens within where you are is what matters most. We have a family environment." (Pelosi).

### **What Does Previous Research Indicate Educators Can Do**

When we consider the idea that the classroom is possibly the only stable foundation that homeless children have in their lives, we know that by teachers creating a classroom environment that feels safe they can provide students with a sense of security (Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins, 1997). Educators educating themselves, specifically with the McKinney-Vento Act, in order to properly manage having a homeless child in their class is imperative. Educating parents to the particulars of the McKinney-Vento Act, so they are aware of their rights and the rights of their children would be a supportive choice regarding the parents of the children in the school district (Murphy & Tobin 2011). Educators can make differences in children's lives in many ways. By focusing on providing students with a stable atmosphere and successful education we afford them the opportunity to break the cycle of homelessness (Knowlton, 2006). Teachers can develop a close relationship with the parents of their homeless students, finding opportunities to meet with parents, if needed, at the shelters they are temporarily living in (Robertson, 1998). Another aspect that might prove helpful to homeless students is to provide these students opportunity for weekly transportation to the public library for study sessions (Robertson). Living in shelters and motels limits a student's privacy and quiet time for a productive study period. Providing opportunity to study at the public library could encourage students to read and accomplish homework and school projects that need completion (Robertson). An article by Titus (2007), *Strategies and Resources for Enhancing the Achievement of Mobile Students*, mentions within his article using an intervention to welcome new students into a classroom by using a tool for developing strategies called Maslow's hierarchy of needs such as district administrators providing leadership, guidance, and resources to their staff members. The strategy gives emphasis to basic human needs before moving up the

needs hierarchy in order to meet higher-order needs. Two states, Florida and Texas, have made efforts to develop ways to assist in finding ways to improve transfer of student records of homeless students, such as migrant students, by developing electronic portfolios, which are updated and accessible when students move. These electronic portfolios can provide a timely transfer of student records (Titus). Other suggestions for educators is to provide students with:

- Immediate new student orientation which includes a transition buddy – by providing students with an orientation informing them of school procedures and expectations, as well as a tour of the school helps to make a new student feel comfortable in their new school. Providing new students with a transition buddy offers someone for the student to get to know right away, someone who can include them in activities with other classmates, as well as a classmate who they might be able to ask questions of should the need arise.
- Access to extracurricular programs – by providing access to extracurricular programs students are offered the opportunity to intermingle with fellow classmates while receiving either physical or mental stimuli.
- Various forms of communication – students who are living in a homeless situation may not have computer access or telephones. Communication with parents of students is important and discussion with parents should be made in order to identify what method of communication would work best for the family: computer, phone calls, texting, letters home, face to face meetings, or specific date and times to talk weekly regarding a student.
- Timely transfer of student records – It is not unusual for homeless families to move regularly, and therefore, change schools regularly. Transfer of school

records is not always completed in a timely manner. Ensuring that a student's records are transferred in a timely manner to guarantee that a student does not fall academically behind is imperative. (Titus).

With the fast-growing number of homeless families in the United States and the high mobility of these families (Homeless Families, 2009) educators could benefit from staff professional development that is targeted toward mobile students, so that educators have a clearer understanding of what they can do to assist and better manage these students (Titus).

### **Summary of Literature Review**

With the United States facing homelessness and finding the numbers growing, Congress established the McKinney Act's Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) in response to reports that only 57% of homeless children were attending school. The purpose was to help ensure these homeless students receive the same education as their counterparts, students living in homes. While progress was made with grant funding, and a rise in school attendance was seen, the U. S. Department of Education's evaluations still found many barriers unaddressed. This situation was attempted to be addressed with the 2001 reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act, however, due to lack of funding not all of the concerns have been able to be addressed. The McKinney-Vento Act does provide a definition, stating that children and youth who "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" are considered homeless (McKinney-Vento, 2008). The McKinney-Vento Act has also made it possible for students to remain within their home school district, regardless of their mobility. Additional barriers such as, enrollment being delayed due to lack of immunization records, birth certificates, school records, etc., are now all protected under the McKinney-Vento Act, and a student's education is no longer disrupted for lack of paperwork.

While families are becoming one of the fastest growing subdivisions of the homeless population (Homeless Families, 2009), the majority of homeless families are single-parent, headed by the mother (Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins, 1997). Some of the effects that can be found with homeless children are nutritional, developmental, emotional, and psychological (Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins). Academically, homeless children have been found to have double the learning disabilities, with 75% reading below grade level, and 36% having needed to repeat a grade. Homeless children have also been found to have triple the emotional and behavioral issues than children who live in stable homes (Willard & Kulinna, 2012).

Homeless students lack many everyday necessities, including nutritional needs, which can affect their academic performance (Willard & Kulinna). Often the only stable environment that these students have is their classroom (Knowlton, 2006). As their teachers we can help to provide them with a safe and stable environment so they feel a sense of security (Yamaguchi, Strawser & Higgins, 1997). Teachers can reach out to the parents of their students in order to make them aware of the laws with regards to the McKinney-Vento Act, so that their children are not being unnecessarily removed from school, or otherwise kept from attending classes, due to parents' lack of understanding their rights (Murphy & Tobin, 2011). Being aware of students' lifestyles and providing them with sensitivity toward what they are experiencing in their daily existence is just the beginning of how teachers are capable of facilitating assistance to these students and their families. Some suggestions within the classroom on how teachers may be able to provide assistance for these students is to arrange for a transition buddy, assisting them in obtaining access to extracurricular activities, and providing various forms of communication between the school and family regarding school activities and homework (Titus, 2007). The first

step in helping these students is educating ourselves through research and literature, so that we understand, and then educating them so they can succeed.

### **Chapter 3: Study Design**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to investigate what educators can do to help ensure academic success in their students who are experiencing situations of homelessness or that of a transient nature. Much of the previous research that has been conducted within the area of homeless children and academic success has been minimal, if any at all. This study specifically used information gleaned from adults who were challenged academically by homelessness while growing up. For my study, I considered not only previous research but how these participants felt they could have been helped to succeed academically considering their living circumstances. Through the use of previous research and interviews with adults who experienced homelessness as children I gained a more intimate insight as to how these students can be helped academically.

#### **Methods and Procedures**

I began the research process by reaching out to the prospective participants through an email, explaining the purpose of the study, and the position that they would take within the study. Once they agreed to become a participant I interviewed them via whichever manner they were comfortable: in person, telephone, or email. The interview consisted of questions regarding their situations while they were growing up homeless and the struggles that they faced academically. I asked them what they felt were some of the challenges that they faced as students who were homeless. I questioned them as to what they felt teachers could have done, or how they may have attended to them, to help them succeed considering their diverse living

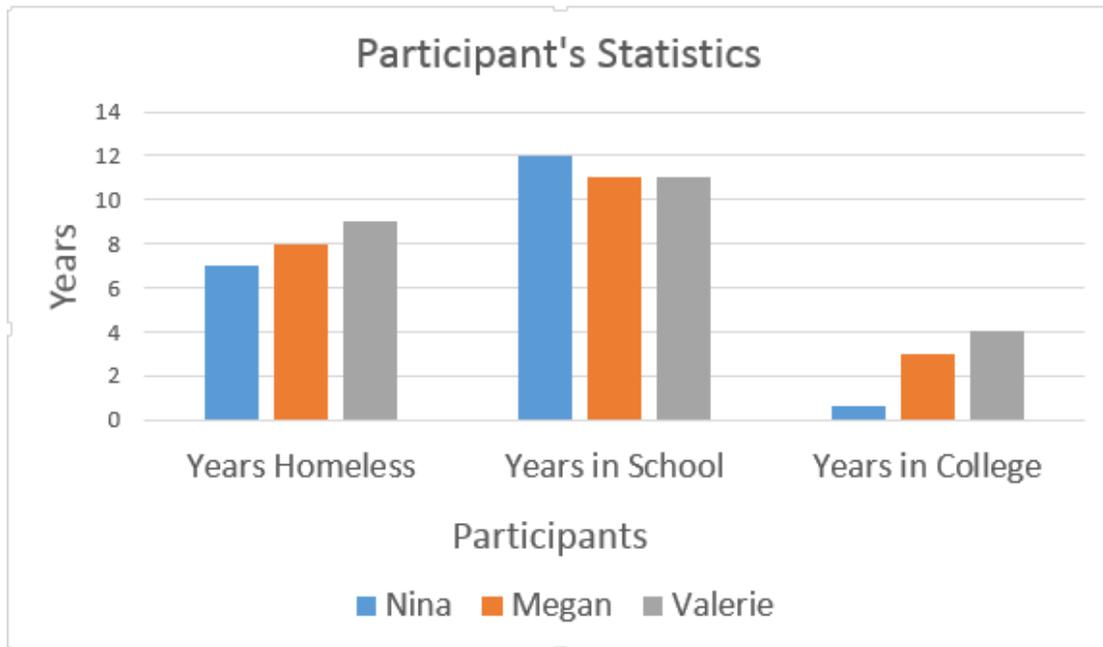
circumstances. Interviews that were conducted in person were recorded. Interviews that were conducted via telephone were also recorded, with the participant's knowledge, and supplemented with written notes, in case of recording errors.

### **Participants**

Via email I contacted three adults, all of whom experienced homelessness as children, explaining my research study and requested an interview. The interviews were completed in a manner preferred by the individual: in person, by telephone, or by email. Results of the interviews were reported in-depth with themes emerging being reported in individual form, protecting participant's anonymity through the use of pseudonyms. Subjects were selected through my research and knowledge of individuals who experienced homelessness as children. Participants did not receive any fees, extra credit, or other items for participation in the study. Perspective participants were contacted via email asking them if they would like to participate in my study.

### **Meet the Participants**

The three participants who I selected for this project all grew up in the United States, with variations of the areas in which they grew up. The participants were self-selected, meaning they chose to participate in this research. They are not a statistical sample as some of the research I reference within the background of my study. The three ladies experiences occurred during different age ranges for each woman providing me with varying outlooks of their situations. `



This figure illustrates specific statistics on the participants of this research

## Nina

I interviewed Nina first through email. After receiving Nina's approval to participate in my study I emailed her my list of questions. She returned a portion of her answers via a letter through the mail, including a letter stating that she would prefer to complete the interview by means of a phone conversation. We spoke on the phone three times, and concluded the interview process via computer, conversing twice in order to tie up any final questions either Nina or I had.

Nina was homeless from the age of 1-8 years old. During this time she lived with her parents, in shelters, and in foster homes. The time spent living with her parents was when she was very young. Her father died when she was 4 years old. He was an alcoholic who was beat up and run over by a truck. After the death of her father her mother began drinking and she was taken away from her mother due to her substance abuse, and placed in foster homes. She had 5 siblings who lived with her on and off during this time. Her experiences at home during that time

consisted of fighting, weapons, ambulances, cops, alcoholism, and abuse. Her father was abusive and at times her mother was verbally abusive. For this reason, she and her siblings spent time in shelters and foster care. In reaction to all of this Nina went totally mute from the age of 4 until the age of 7.

Despite a difficult beginning with her childhood, Nina did graduate from high school. She did enroll in some child psychology courses at the local community college but dropped out after 6 months. She has worked as a para-professional in the public school system at an elementary school for 18 years. She has a son and a grandson. As an adult she has never experienced homelessness again.

### **Megan**

I interviewed Megan first through email. After receiving Megan's approval to participate in my study I emailed her my list of questions. She returned a portion of her answers via a letter through the mail, including a letter stating that she would prefer to complete the interview by means of a phone conversation. We spoke on the phone two times, and concluded the interview process via computer, conversing twice in order to tie up any final questions either Megan or I had.

Unlike Nina, Megan was much older when she faced homelessness, approximately 10-18 years old (grades 5-12). During this time she lived with her mom, neighbors, and in foster care. She had two sisters who lived with her for some of that time. Her sisters were younger than her, ages 9 and 11, and went into the foster care system when she was 14. Megan's living situations during this time were erratic, sometimes being dropped off with people who she did not know, foster homes, thus many different schools. This was a consistent lifestyle for her, moving every 6

months, for a 5 or 6 year period, until she left 'home' for good at the age of 17. She lived a transient lifestyle of sleeping in cars, people's garages, etc.

Megan did not graduate from high school but did receive her GED. She also attended 3 years of college, on and off, mostly taking courses related to healthcare. She did not receive a specific degree in the healthcare field. She has two sons, both adults now. She has been homeless as an adult several times, living in shelters. She had to live in a shelter for a couple of days with her boys when they were younger, until they were able to double up with some friends of her ex-husbands for a couple of months. Eventually they were able to get into their own place. She is currently at her job of 5 years as an office manager of a 336 unit low-income housing building, where she is able to use her social service skills as well as her "tough as nails persona".

### **Valerie**

I interviewed Valerie in a face to face interview. After receiving Valerie's approval to participate in my study we spoke on the phone and arranged a day and time that would be benefit our schedules. I conducted Valerie's interview in one sitting, although we did have three or four phone conversations following the interview and her thoughts regarding the study. We concluded the interview process via computer, conversing twice in order to tie up any final questions either Valerie or I had.

Valerie spent the longest, consistent time in a homeless situation as defined by the McKinney-Vento Act. She spent approximately nine years as a homeless child. During that time she lived with a variety of people. She lived with her mom and older sister, and informal foster parents for a while. She was in the supervision of her mom most of the time, and where they lived depended of where her mom could find a place for them to live. She had 3 older siblings (1

sister, 2 brothers). She believes that her brothers lived with her on and off, and her sister lived with her until she moved out of state, when Valerie was 14 years old.

Valerie did not continue with high school, but like Megan, did earn her GED at the age of 21. She has 3 children, all of whom are now grown. She was never homeless with her children, although she was homeless as an adult, at approximately 18 years of age, for about 8 months. During that time she lived with friends or in motels and lived off of powdered donuts and hamburgers from 7-11.

Valerie continued with her education after earning her GED and attended her local community college and graduated with a Deaf Studies Certificate in 2009. She continued on with her studies and received a Bachelor's Degree in American Sign Language-English Interpretation in 2012 from a top-rated major technological university in the Northeast, with a GPA of 3.85. She is currently a Freelance Sign Language Interpreter who has interpreted for a former president of the United States, many celebrities, and has traveled to many countries for her career.

### **Positionality of the Researcher**

I am teacher, certified in general education, grades 1-6, currently working as a substitute teacher while obtaining my Master's Degree as a Literacy Specialist from The College at Brockport, SUNY. As a substitute teacher I see many children living in various situations, some who are homeless, living in motels or with other family members, and I see some of the daily struggles that these students face. I also faced my own struggles while facing these same diverse struggles as a student growing up living in motels for four years. I feel that interviewing adult participants who, not only experienced such diverse living situations as students, but have

managed to find success in their lives can provide some beneficial guidance as to what teachers may have done to help them academically during their situation.

### **Data Collection /Setting**

The data collection chosen for this study was through previous research and interviews that I conducted with chosen participants to gather in-depth information pertaining to my topic of study (see Appendix A). The setting was chosen by the participants. After agreeing to being interviewed it was at the discretion of the participant whether the interview would take place via email, in person, or by telephone. If the interview was to take place in person I discussed possible locations where the participants would be comfortable being interviewed. One interview was conducted in person while two interviews were conducted via email and phone conversations.

### **Procedures**

I began the research process by reaching out to the prospective participants through a letter explaining the purpose of the study and the position that they would take within the study. After they agreed to become a participant I interviewed them via whichever manner they were comfortable: in person, telephone, or email. The interview consisted of questions regarding their situations while they were growing up homeless and the struggles that they faced academically. I asked them what they felt were some of the challenges that they faced as students facing the diversity of homelessness. I questioned them as to what they felt teachers could have done, or how they may have attended to them, to help them succeed considering their diverse circumstances. I requested consent to audio record all interviews. Interviews that were conducted in person were audio recorded. Interviews that were conducted via telephone were also recorded,

with the participant's knowledge, in case of recording errors. In both cases I also transcribed written notes.

### **Analysis of the Data**

After conducting interviews with three adult participants I interpreted the answers provided during their interviews, and compared through content analysis, looking for possible trends in their answers. I then took these answers and saw how they paralleled the research that I had read on this topic.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study include, but are not limited to, the fact that the data gathered in this study was limited to qualitative data only. The participants interviewed in this study were from a very small, self-selected group of individuals, therefore, they do not represent the majority of individuals who have experienced homelessness and their outlooks, but rather a sampling. While participants in this study are varied, they do not necessarily include the wide variety of participants who could be available to participate in a study such as this, due to the small number of participants.

## **Chapter 4: Results**

The purpose of this study and the interviews conducted was to provide some insight on the current situation of homeless children in our nation and what the opinions of three adults, who experienced homelessness as children, feel teachers and districts can do to ensure academic success in their students. Each of the women I interviewed experienced homelessness at different stages within their youth, and yet, through my interviews I was able to notice five consistent

themes that surfaced throughout all three of the interviews. Please note that all names used in this study, as well as locations, are pseudonyms.

### **Theme 1: Lack of Compassion/Need for Compassion**

One of the themes that I noticed throughout my interviews was that the women I interviewed seemed to feel of lack of compassion, or a need of compassion, from either their teachers and or administrators within the school district while they were experiencing homelessness.

Nina felt that her teachers did not connect with her and did not make any attempts in order to connect with her. “Teachers label kids too quickly, ‘that kid’s bad’. Then they lose any connection with the student. There needs to be less stereotyping.” By stereotyping students teachers are closed off to their individuality and not giving each student the attention they deserve. Teachers need to attempt to make connections with their students so that they can gain better understanding of their student’s situations.

While Megan was able to experience quite a bit of compassion from many of her teachers, it was that compassion that also made the lack of compassion in some districts so noticeable. As she stated, “I did have a couple of teachers/nuns, actually, that paid close attention to what I looked like and if I was hungry and helped me out, quietly and without embarrassing me, but I also had some teachers when I was changing schools very often that just kind of treated me like a burden. Like they could ignore me because I wasn’t going to learn anything. I always did pretty well in school even under the circumstances, but the teachers who would bring a banana to class and slide it to me with no one noticing, or take me to the nurses offices and give me baby powder to put under my arms because I hadn’t bathed, that really meant a lot to me. But

you wouldn't believe the difference it made when I had a teacher who would take me aside and ask me how I was doing and how they could help. I still remember 3 or 4 of my teachers who went out of their way to help. They knew they couldn't talk to my parents so they would just talk to me. Ask me if I needed food, gave me ideas about what I could do at home, and just took a few minutes extra of their time to let me know they cared. I had one teacher when I first went to public school, she was a black lady named Mrs. B, and she noticed me right away. She always brought me a snack and gave me baby powder and said she would stay after class with me, if I was allowed, to help me with my work. She really seemed to care about where I was or what was going on in my life. I think that was 5<sup>th</sup> grade."

For Valerie, lack of compassion was clearly evident in her interview. When asked how she felt the teachers and districts responded to her situation of being homeless she stated, "Poorly." She related to me one situation that occurred when she 12 years old. "I was pulled into the office by Mr. S at the Intermediate School I was attending. The school was locked because of gangs and there was only two ways to get out. Through the office and the track field. He called me into the office and asked me where we stayed the night before. I was 12 years old. I wasn't sure. Fountain Valley? Garden Grove? I said, 'Are you kicking me out of school?' He said, 'Unfortunately. I don't want to, but I have to.' I was commuting an hour to get to school. I told him to \*\*\*\* off. He said, 'You don't talk to me that way!' I said, '\*\*\*\* you!' and took off running, flipping him the bird, with him chasing me. I ran out the back of the school where there was an opening in the track field. I walked to my mom's work and it took me all day to get there. They never called her. She called them to yell at them and they started to question her so she cowed down. He chased me because I bolted out of that school. I never went back to that school."

Each of these women had situations where they felt a certain lack of compassion from either their teachers or the administration within schools they attended. For Nina, she felt her teachers stereotyped her, rather than get to know her situation and understand her personally. For Megan, although she experienced compassion from some teachers, she also experienced lack of compassion from others teachers who made her feel like nothing more than a burden. While Valerie recalled being questioned, at the age of 12, regarding her living situation and told she was being kicked out of school. Within my own experiences as a student who was homeless I found that the administrators were either not aware of our living situation, or did not care as long as I was attending school. Admittedly, there were some episodes where I did not attend school due to changes in living situations. I never had any questions asked by administrators or teachers about my living situation, or whether or not I needed anything. I do recall during my junior year of high school one teacher who seemed to take an interest in me. I believe it was my Health/Science teacher. The fact that she suddenly showed an interest in me made me a little nervous. I remember her asking the class things about what the students ate for breakfast, lunch and dinner. At the time my mother, stepfather, sister and I were living in a motel room that did not have a kitchen and we were cooking on a two-slice toaster, so we were very limited as to what we could cook. I remember her saying to the class as a whole, but feeling as if she was looking at me as she said it, that if you don't have a lot of money or food to try to at least eat some cheese in the morning, because that is a dairy. She would provide daily 'hints' like that and look right at me as she said them. To this day I wish I could remember her name. She was the only teacher in four years that ever reached out to me in any way.

**Theme 2: Lack of Friends**

In theme 2, the answers given were blunt and to the point, without a lot of detail given. When I asked the question, “Can you explain how your living situation affected your relationships with fellow students?” the answers I received were very blunt and straight to the point.

Nina’s answer was, “Never had friends in school. Never spoke to anyone. Socially shutdown.” To explain, she mentioned elsewhere in her interview that she was “very shut down, closed off, and went totally mute from ages 4-7”. Whether her lack of friends was from her being homeless or her being mute she did not state.

As for Megan, her response to that same question was, “I used to pretend to be someone different every place I moved to. In Arizona I was a cowgirl. In California I was a beach girl. So, most kids just thought I was weird.”

Valerie’s response was, “Or the fact that I didn’t have any. You could have had small pox! I think they call it the Fruit Basket Upset Theory. You go into a group/room and a few are welcoming, and you find out that those few are not the ‘top dogs’. I didn’t have a lot of friends. Maybe one or two. Then she named her one friend who she has had since she was about 12 and is still friends with.

My experience was very similar the four years that I was homeless. I did not make friends with any of the other students at school. If I remember correctly, I made friends with one girl during my sophomore year of high school. She was more of an outcast, which is probably why I was willing to make friends with her. It is hard to make friends with kids when you know that you will not be staying at the school for a long time. You do not want to get close to anyone

for multiple reasons. It hurts to say goodbye to friends who you really like. If you really like someone how can you possibly explain to them your living conditions? It is impossible to always meet at their home after school. At some point they will want to see your home. I always joked with my sister and said that I could never invite friends over and say, “Sure, come on over to my place, The Malahini Motel on Whittier Boulevard.” It would have just been too embarrassing. My best, and only, friend was my younger sister.

### **Theme 3: A Lot of Change in Living Situations/Schools**

In the third theme, I found that there was a lot of change in living situations within all the women who I interviewed. The one thing that I found to be different among the three was that Nina said she attended the same school, meaning she never changed schools, where Valerie and Megan attended many different schools.

Nina’s living experiences while she was growing up consisted of living with her parents, until she was about 4 years old (after her father had died). After that her life was comprised of living in multiple foster homes. Although this was a consistent type of lifestyle for her while growing up, she was able to stay enrolled in the same school.

Megan’s homeless living situation was much different than Nina’s having taken place when she was much older. Megan lived a very transient lifestyle living with friends and neighbors before going into foster care. The effect of living this type of lifestyle resulted in Megan attending many schools. She stated in her interview, “My learning environment was difficult because I was always at a new school and when we were living in cars or hotel rooms or staying with friends and always trying to act like everyone else, sometimes that was good, sometimes that was bad.”

Valerie spent 9 years living in various locations. When asked where she lived she responded, “It was varied. Sometimes motels, sometimes apartments, knowing they would be short-lived, knowing we were destined to be evicted. We stayed at strangers houses – friends of friends of someone my stepdad knew, but the arrangement would always be that we would need to be gone before their kids woke up in the morning so there was no explaining to do. Sometimes we would sit in restaurants, ride buses all night – transfer to transfer, because we were locked out of the motel because we couldn’t pay. I was in a temporary informal foster home during middle school, I think two times.”

When I asked Valerie, “Did you find that because of your living situations you changed schools often? If so, how often did you change schools?” She replied, “I either didn’t attend or I commuted. She (her mother) tried to get me to go. She drove far, rather than keep moving me. I just didn’t want to go. She tried. For her it was pride, so you didn’t tell. I was most successful with school when I lived with my sister because she walked me to school.”

Moving a lot as a homeless child and having to change schools can take its toll on a student. As a child we moved every two years due to my father’s job, so I was already familiar with regularly changing schools. When my parents divorced I was 12 years old. We were homeless by the time I was 13 years old, spending four years moving from motel to motel, and it was not any easier. In the 12 years that I attended school I changed schools 11 times.

#### **Theme 4: Effects on Student Academics**

Academically these women were all affected by their living conditions as children. Again, their answers were blunt and to point when asked, “Can you explain how your living conditions affected your academic education?”

Nina responded that she, “Always just passed. Missing time, could never go home and study.”

Megan’s response was, “I was smart and caught on easily, but always just passed due to home situation and being absent. Also, started working at 13 years old.”

Valerie’s answer was the most informative. She did not say specifically how well she performed in school, but commented on the fact that books were always available to her. “Mom’s rule was: we may be poor but we’re not poor, white trash.” She was a prolific reader. We were all big readers. I would often read my older sister’s books. I had books available to me. Not a lot of age appropriate material. I read anything and everything! I read a book on human deformities! I hated to be told, “You can’t do something.” I was exposed to a lot of reading material.

Living the life of a homeless child can be strenuous on their ability to stay focused, depending on where they are living and how many people they are living with. I, myself, was considered a good student, who earned good grades. However, living in motels and moving constantly and needing to change schools regularly takes its toll on even the best of students. It was in my junior year of high school that I, too, ended up dropping out of high school.

Academically speaking, Nina graduated high school, Megan and Valerie both dropped out of high school and earned their GED’s. Valerie went back to school to further her education and has since earned a Bachelor’s Degree. As for myself, like Megan and Valerie, I also dropped out of high school and earned my GED. After my children were grown I decided to further my education and received my Associate’s Degree in Liberal Arts with an Education Transfer from Genesee Community College (GCC). After graduating from GCC, I continued on to Buffalo

State College and received my Bachelor's Degree in Childhood Education. Today, I am in the process of completing my Master's Degree in Literacy from my children's Alma Mater, The College at Brockport, State University of New York.

### **Theme 5: Need for Intervention**

When I spoke to each of these women regarding interviewing them for my research, they were more than welcoming to assist me. Each of them were willing to help me with my project because they felt the desire for teachers and/or administrators to know what they feel would have helped them. They can now reflect back on their situations and see what teachers did that helped to make a difference in their lives, and how they feel teachers may have been able to help more.

When Nina was homeless she said she was 'very shut down, closed off'. She was so closed off that sometimes she hid in the closet at school. When this happened the teachers would call her home and have her sisters bring her home. When I asked Nina what ways she felt the teachers/districts may have assisted her to ensure her academic success her response was, "Teachers did not connect. There needs to be more contact with students. There needs to be more involvement in home life. Ask more questions. Get to know your students!" And she reiterated to me that she felt there was a problem with stereotyping too easily, rather than getting to know each student individually. She works in the public school system today and said that she feels that she still sees this happening. Teachers need to take the time to get to know children, make home visits and see what is going on in their lives so they can better understand a student who seems to be having difficulty, in order to help them.

For Megan, what seemed to make the most difference for her academically were the teachers who took the time to care. The teachers who were more aware of her situation were

what made the most difference for her both academically and personally. Megan stated, “I improved academically because I knew they gave a crap about how well I did. They knew I was smart or treated me like they thought I was and when I felt like I was just surviving day to day, then maybe when I tried harder, because they believed in me, it made a huge difference academically and personally. Because normally, when I would go to a new school I wouldn’t try to make friends or try hard in school, because it didn’t matter. I’d be leaving again soon. But the one who took the time to check in with me and try to help, made me want to do better and want to try.”

Valerie’s responded to my question, “When considering ways that teachers/districts may have assisted you, what do you think they could have done that would have helped to ensure your academic success during the time that you were living in such diverse living situations? with the following answer: “For students, generally, bringing families together, reading together. Seems a little Utopian, family literacy activities. Life becomes overwhelming. They need family time. Good down time. Are the parents literate? Provide reading material of interest. They (the students and parents) need to know that if they forget, or lose it, it’s okay. Give them books!!! Books they can keep. What they have is minimal and coveted. When I chose what I had to take with me, my books always went with me. Also, know that these kids may not learn the same. They have a lot more going on. They have adult worries! Offer independent studies. At home they have other worries. Is the electric on? Are we going to have something to eat? How is Mom? How is Dad? Did they find a job? More flexibility with work and homework. Traveling teacher? Vocational rehab? One of the biggest barriers – my way or the highway attitude, inflexibility. They have social pressures of trying to fit in – clothes, food, and not getting beat up. Academics are sometimes the last thing on their minds.”

Through my own experiences I would have to agree with all three of these women and the needs that they mention. As Valerie stated, children who are homeless do face many worries that their counterparts do not typically face. I say this as a child who was raised in what would be considered a “typical, ‘All-American’ family”. I grew up in a family with a father who was an executive and a mother who was an at-home mother. This was my family until my parents divorced when I was 12 years old. That is when things really changed. It seemed like in the blink of an eye my mother, sister and I were homeless, and with worries I could have never imagined having. It is interesting how when your living situation changes, so does your situation in school. As I look back I notice that there is a distinct difference in how well I fit in socially, how my teachers responded to me, and how well I performed academically.

Throughout these interviews there seems to be a general feeling of a lack of understanding, and/or a lack of teachers taking time to understand students’ individual situations. While it is true that teachers do have a lot of responsibility, with many students in one class on a daily basis, it is also their responsibility to do their best to teach each child to the best of their ability. Some students are in better living situations than others and do not require as much direct attention, but every student needs and deserves this attention.

### **Summary of Themes**

The three women who I selected to interview for my research each experienced homelessness as children at different ages in their lives, and yet still had very common themes within their interviews. Each of my participants noticed a lack of compassion and understanding from their teachers and their situation. The only exception that I found, within this theme, with my interviews was that Megan was also able to find a certain amount of compassion from some teachers who she came into contact with. Other than the notable few teachers who Megan

remembers reaching out to her, the women who I interviewed do not recall teachers showing any other specific caring or understanding of their situation. Each of my participants also recognized an inability or difficulty making friends. Megan acknowledged trying to become who she felt they expected her to be in order to be accepted. All three of my participants also experienced a very transient lifestyle consisting of moving regularly. There were experiences of living in motels, living with friends, and living in foster care. With the exception of Nina, with the consistent movement came a need of having to change schools. Each of my participants felt that the homeless lifestyle that they led while growing up had a definite effect on their academic achievement, with two of the three dropping of high school and receiving their GED in later years. For this reason, all three of my participants feel there is a need for intervention to help current students who are facing homelessness, which is why the participants were willing to be interviewed. The participants do have very different opinions, due to their reflections of their personal experiences, as to what they feel educators should do to assist their homeless students. Nina's suggestions for educators is to get to know their students more. She feels that there is a problem with stereotyping students, and that it would help teachers to understand their students if there was more contact and involvement in the student's home life. Megan said what made the most difference for her academically was the teachers who took the time to care about her. Her suggestion is to take the time to care about the students who you know are in need. She had teachers who did not, and that did affect her negatively. Valerie's suggestions were two-fold. She feels that it would help if the school districts provided family literacy activities, which could help to bring families together, because the family time they would receive would be rewarding for both the parents and the children. She also felt that it would help to give students books to read

that they could keep, and not have to worry about returning. So many homeless children have minimal belongings, and books are relatively small, and can be read over and over again.

These themes are consistent with much of the research I have read. While the participants had very different opinions of what they felt was most important for educators to focus on, the answers they gave come from personal experiences attributed to their homelessness and what they felt would have assisted them while they were growing up. Many students experiencing the same situations that these participants experienced could benefit from the opinions they are providing.

### **Analysis**

After interviewing my participants, I compared their answers through content analysis to look for trends that I might find between the three participants. All three participants held common positions toward feeling a lack of compassion from their educators, having a lack of friends, having a lot of change in their living situations and/or schools, feeling a negative effect on their academics, and feeling a need for intervention for students who are homeless. Many of these themes were parallel to what I had found in some my research. What was not as parallel to the research that I have read was the participants' answers to what educators can do to help homeless children succeed. The participant's answers came from personal experiences, relative to what was and what was not done to help them. While research does provide many worthwhile strategies that educators would find useful to assist them with their homeless students, it would be worth considering incorporating the ideas of those who have lived the life of a homeless child.

In an interest of what my participants felt was the most important factor in breaking the cycle of homelessness I received some varied responses. Nina responded, "There needs to be lower rent. Rent needs to be at an attainable level for the working class. When people are

homeless it is near to impossible for them to save the money in order to place their families in an apartment because the cost is so high. If rents were more affordable, there would be less homeless on the street.”

Megan said, “The most important things for me has been my perseverance, my strong will, and the people in the schools who helped me the most. They weren’t sounding the alarm, not calling the police or social services. It was the many people who did little things to help me get through one day at a time, a snack, a hug, an encouraging word, a compliment on how smart I was, or anything like that, made my day a little less painful.” When I asked her what she felt is the most important factor in breaking the cycle of homelessness she replied, “I don’t know that I have one. We are still very, very poor in our house and struggle, just in a much more loving, nurturing environment.”

When Valerie was asked the same question she responded, “Working hard. You have to work four times harder. You can’t be afraid of asking what resources are out there. There’s a definite information deficit compared to the mainstream public. The mainstream public may know the resources that are out there, where the poor really don’t. They can research it on the internet now. We didn’t have that back when we were homeless. Unfortunately, I don’t think our Social Services System is completely aware of them either. You have to be proactive and it’s tough, tiring, and exhausting. You have to never forget what it’s like to be homeless. When you’re tired and want to give up, you need to remember what that was like, so you keep going.

I found it interesting that with as many similarities as I was able to find within the themes in my research with the participants who I researched, that the answers they gave to my final question was so varied. They all gave very strong answers, and yet all definitely had a different outlook on the answer.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions**

Throughout these interviews there seems to be a general feeling of a lack of understanding, and/or a lack of teachers taking time to understand students' individual situations. While it is true that teachers do have a lot of responsibility, with many students in one class on a daily basis, it is also their responsibility to do their best to teach children to the best of their ability. Some students are in better living situations than others and do not require as much direct attention, but every student needs and deserves this attention. Upon completion of my research I was able to establish four conclusions with respect to my participants.

### **Though Homelessness was Experienced at Different Ages, There Were Common Experiences**

When we examine these three women one of the first things that I noticed was the age difference of when they experienced homelessness. While certain things were out of their control such as, unstable living conditions, causing the need to move and change schools, each of the women had difficulty making or maintaining friendships. Megan, being older, was able to manipulate a facade to her fellow students in order to fit in still knowing, or feeling, that they still looked at her as odd. One might assume that young children, like Nina and Valerie, would be able to make friends without placing thought, or consideration, as to their living conditions, yet they still felt the strain of their socio-economic lifestyle at an early age and withdrew from making friends. Both Nina and Valerie were so affected by the conditions in which they were being raised that neither of them made many friends, if any, due to being socially withdrawn. This is very different than the women they have grown to become over the years. In fact, all three of the women who I interviewed seemed to be out-going and friendly women, with a tremendous amount of confidence.

### **As Research States, Multiple Schools Were Attended**

When we scrutinize the transitory lifestyle of the participants in this study, it coincides with the research, which states that statistics show that 41% of homeless children attend two different schools in a school year, while 28% attend three or more schools in a single school year (Julianelle & Foscarinis, 2003) which is caused by high mobility due to lack of a fixed residence. Nina was fortunate that her situation did not require her to change schools.

### **Administrations Need for Awareness and Compassion for Student's Situations**

The action of the administration and teachers toward each of these women when they were under their guidance is unacceptable. If there was a question as to where a 12-year old child was living, that question should have been posed to an adult, not forced upon a child in regards to situations that are out of her control. As a parent I would be concerned about the neglect of the authority of an educational institution not to notify a parent or guardian upon a student leaving the grounds without permission. I question whether the decisions and behaviors made by the figures in authority who came into contact with these children were due to the fact that they were homeless.

### **Participants Agree There is a Need for Intervention**

All of the participants interviewed did agree with the need for intervention for children facing living situations similar to what they experienced growing up. They felt had there been teachers who had been more involved in their situation they would have performed better academically. Each participant did have different opinions of what they felt was important for the individual needs of these children. These opinions, of course, are based on their own experiences. Megan identified within her interview that she did have some teachers who did

make a connection with her, and it did make a considerable difference for her academically compared to when she attended schools where teachers did not make that connection with her. That said, it seems evident through my interviews with these ladies, just as we need to be aware that some children may learn differently, we also need to be open to the fact that we may need to take the time to get to know each of these students in order to acquaint ourselves with their individual needs for them to succeed. Each situation is different, therefore, each child's needs are different. We cannot assume that every homeless child who walks into our classroom will have the same need as one the previous year. It is much more complicated than that, and time and effort needs to be taken to understand each families circumstances. If districts and teachers can examine homeless students' needs, modify them when necessary, every student will have the opportunity to succeed.

### **Implications**

The implications that my research will have on my teaching career is very personal. When I first decided to become a teacher I never thought that I would delve into my own past experiences as a child, facing memories that I thought I had left far behind me. Walking into a classroom and seeing the faces of children who are facing the same situation that I faced every day for four years has made me want to look forward to teaching these children. Upon completing this research, and after much thought, I have arrived at three implications that will affect my teaching in the future.

### **Finding a Way to Help Make Sure These Children Do Succeed**

I truly believe that these students can succeed, regardless of their living situation. After interviewing the three participants, talking with them in-depth about their own experiences, and

seeing how despite all that they were up against, they have managed to succeed and make a great life for themselves and their families, there is no reason that any student facing the situation of homelessness cannot achieve the same. I have spoken with many educators who have said they do not know what to do for homeless students in their classrooms because they do not understand what they are experiencing. This tells me that educators do care and have compassion for the homeless child.

### **Get to Know Your Students and Talk to Them**

I would refer teachers to Nina's suggestion to get to know their students and talk to them. Do not be afraid to ask questions. I know that in my own experience with educators I have met many who have shown an amazing amount of love and compassion toward their students, from ensuring they have daily snacks, to making sure they have clean, warm clothing. As an educator who has experienced homelessness, I will try to be open and aware of my students' needs.

### **Homelessness Should Never Be Considered an Excuse**

I want to be clear that homelessness should never be considered an excuse for not completing homework or for not achieving academic success. It is true that homeless students are facing diverse living situations, however, we would be providing them a disservice by excusing them from work. When we make ourselves aware of their living situations we can discover ways to adapt their study requirements and/or homework. As an educator I wish to find ways to assist students in achieving success, not to find ways to be excused from it.

### **Overall Significance of the Study**

According to Grant et al (2013), National data collected from a study conducted by the Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study, which focused on 2631 low-income children from 20 cities, with 4 waves of data, from 1998 to 2006, nearly 1 in 10 children experienced an episode of homelessness. This accounts for 9.8% of the children studied. Of those children, nearly 1 in 4 (23.6%) were shown to have experienced an episode of doubling up, or living with friends and family members. By the end of 2008, large increases were seen in major cities across the United States. The family homeless shelter demand rose 40% in New York City, Massachusetts escalated 32%, and Minneapolis saw a surge of 20% (Grant et al). For the first time, the United States Education Department data showed more than 1 million homeless children enrolled in public school during the 2010-2011 school year (Grant et al).

The interviews that I conducted were of only three women's experiences, which took place mainly during the late '70s through the early '80s. Since that time the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 was established, and reauthorized in 2001 as the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act (Canfield, 2014), in order to ameliorate the effects that homelessness had on children's education. When looking at the results of the interviews with the ladies who I interviewed, there seems to be a more personal issue at hand than they noticed, or felt, either could have helped them or did help them during this time in their life. All of their answers, with regards to their needs, were very personal, not data driven. We live in a world that is driven by data, we want answers to questions, and we need to see results. In the world of education, it may sometimes take years to see or hear specific results. With regards to our children, or students, we should not take the luxury to see what may or may not result from a specific "idea". Talk to the parents, talk to the children. Find out what

we can accomplish with our students in our classrooms, in our districts, right now. What can we do to help them to be able to manage their homework on a weekly basis? As a student who experienced homelessness, I know that I was able to accomplish all of my homework on Tuesday nights, or every other weekend, because those were the times when I went to visit my dad. If teachers had known of my situation and were willing to work with me, I would have excelled academically, despite the fact that I was homeless.

I think back to my interviews and one thing that Valerie said resonates with me. She said, “Are the parents literate?” In so much of the literature I have read I have heard the term, “break the cycle” referencing breaking the cycle of poverty. When children are being raised by parents who are illiterate and homeless, how are they expected to “break the cycle”? Valerie’s question is one that teachers must be asking. When students go home at night, do they have someone who is able to assist them with their homework? It is hard enough for a homeless student to complete homework, depending on their living situation, but imagine not having anyone to help you if you did need help.

I realize there are many responsibilities already placed in the laps of teachers, and it seems that every year more are added. If teachers could take the time, and I am sure that many do, to truly get to know their students, their parents, and their lives, they can make a difference and help to ensure academic success. It is amazing how much simply showing that you care can make a difference in a child’s life. Talk to them. Visit their home. Give them a banana. Give them a book. Do not stereotype them. Make arrangements, not excuses, for their work when necessary so that they are able to complete their work. Hold them responsible and accountable to complete their work. According to Grant et al (2013), “family homelessness has become more prevalent and has affected poor and low-income families more generally than in the

1980's...there has been less attention to the issue of child and family homelessness than in the two previous decades. This is reflected in fewer research studies, government reports, print, and broadcast stories and in less political attention to children and families in poverty.”(p.e7) In short, family homelessness and children facing this in our classrooms is not going to get better any time soon. We need to do whatever we can to help these children.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. While you were growing up how long did you spend living under the definition of homeless? (The definition of homeless as provided by the McKinney-Vento Act – individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence).
2. Who did you live with during this time?
3. How many siblings did you have?
4. Did they live with you during this time?
5. What were your specific living situations while you were in school?
6. With regards to your siblings, do you feel that they were affected in the same way that you were by your living situation? Please explain.
7. How old were you during this time period?
8. Was this a temporary lifestyle for you, or a consistent style of living for you while you grew up? Please explain.
9. How did you feel the teachers and districts responded to your situation? Were they understanding and/or helpful? Please explain.
10. Were there time frames during this period that you did not attend school due to your situation? If so, how long would you miss school for? Were your school personnel/teachers aware of the reason behind your absenteeism? If so, how were they made aware of it?

11. Did you find that because of your living situations you changed schools often? If so, how often did you change schools?
12. Did you find that you missed school often due to your living situation? If so, why do you feel that was?
13. Within my research I have read that many children who are living in diverse situations, such as homeless, struggle academically. Can you explain how your living conditions affected your academic education?
14. Can you explain how your living situation affected your relationships with fellow students?
15. When considering ways that teachers/districts may have assisted you, what do you think they could have done that would have helped to ensure your academic success during the time that you were living in such diverse living situations? Please be specific.
16. Were there any specific situations that teachers/districts did that made it difficult for you to achieve your academic goals? For example: structure, homework, etc. Please explain.
17. What the highest grade level you completed?
18. Did you graduate from high school or receive a GED?
19. Did you attend any college? If so, did you earn a degree?
20. What is your current job/career?
21. Do you have any children?

22. Have you ever lived homeless as an adult?

23. Were you ever homeless with your children? (if applicable)

24. What do you feel is the most important factor in breaking the cycle of homelessness?

## **Appendix B**

### Letter to Prospective Participants

Dear Perspective Participant,

I am a graduate student in the process of completing my master's degree at The College at Brockport: State University of New York. I am currently conducting a research project in order to complete my degree as a Literacy Specialist. I am writing to ask if you would be interested in being a participant in my study by allowing me to interview you. I am conducting research regarding what teachers can do to help homeless children achieve academic success. I have a personal interest in this topic because I spent some of my childhood in this situation. I know personally how challenging it can be, and would like to be able to report on opinions from adults who have experienced the challenges that come from having lived in this diverse lifestyle, and how they feel teachers could have specifically helped them. We are all proof that they can become successful, however, it would be wonderful if teachers could hear from those of us that have experienced it what they could do to help their students who are struggling today.

#### **Research Design Proposal:**

##### **Project Title:**

Homeless Children & Academic Achievement: What Do Adults Who Experienced Homelessness As Children Believe Teachers Can Do To Ensure Their Homeless Students Achieve Academic Success?

##### **Purpose of Study:**

The purpose of this study is to investigate what educators can do to help ensure academic success in their students who are experiencing situations of homelessness. With the number of homeless children on the rise yearly it is imperative that teachers take a closer look at what strategies they can use to help these students achieve academic success. Through the use of previous research and interviews with adults who experienced homelessness as children I hope to gain a more intimate insight as to how these students can be helped academically.

**Participants:**

I will contact three adult individuals, all of which experienced homelessness as children, via email explaining my research study and request an interview. The interviews will be completed in a manner preferred by the individual: in person, by telephone, or by email, and will remain anonymous. Results of the interviews will be reported in-depth with themes emerging being reported in aggregate form.

**Research Design:**

The study will be conducted in a narrative research design involving personal interviews with participants who have experienced homelessness as children. Within all of my research I have not found the view of adults who have experienced homelessness, and I feel that this could provide a vital stepping stone for teachers of what they could do to help their students. The numbers of homeless children are on the rise in the United States making this an important topic of study.

Please see attached Statement of Informed Consent

Sincerely,

Debra S. Dumuhosky