

Aspiring Administrators' Knowledge and Leadership Capacity to Mitigate Issues of Poverty and Homelessness in Schools

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Abstract

This study identified Masters of School Administration (MSA) students' knowledge and understanding of poverty and homelessness in schools and sought to increase leadership capacity to mitigate issues of homelessness and poverty in schools. This study provided targeted instruction, an opportunity for school leaders to engage in self-assessment and reflection of their knowledge of poverty and homelessness, and led participants to create school and school district plans to support homeless students. Findings indicate through focused online sessions, reflection in discussion boards, videos, experiential learning, and written assignments that participants reported increased leadership capacity to mitigate issues of homelessness and lead more socially just schools.

Keywords: Homeless Education; School Administrators; Principals; Poverty In Schools; Deficit Thinking

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Introduction

Homelessness is often a result of poverty or disaster and is a growing issue in education that impacts urban, suburban, and rural schools and communities (Miller, 2016a, 2011a; National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2015). Socioeconomic status can have a significant impact on educational opportunities for students (Milner, 2016b). Systemic inequities contributing to persistent cycles of generational poverty among students of color lead to a higher percentage of students of color living in poverty and experiencing homelessness compared to their white peers (Milner, 2016a). The recent economic recession, coupled with social issues faced by LGBTQ youth and undocumented immigrants (Hallett, Miller & Skrla, 2015) and unaccompanied youth (Murphy & Tobin, 2011), have led to an increase in student homelessness and a diversity of ways that youth experience homelessness including the reasons for their homelessness and the situations in which they stay (Hallett, Miller & Skrla). Sadly, homelessness remains an understudied topic even as numbers of homeless and highly mobile students continue to rise (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015; Milner, 2016a).

According to the U. S. Department of Education (2016a), the McKinney-Vento definition of homeless children and youth includes the following:

- 1) individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence including
 - a. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;
 - b. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...;
 - c. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
 - d. migratory children...who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

Subtitle VII-B of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, reauthorized in 2015 by Title IX, Part A of the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) is a federal law that addresses the educational needs of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The law provides some educational rights to students experiencing homelessness such as the right to remain in their school of origin when it is in their best interest to do so and receive transportation to and from school. However, students who are homeless but not living in shelters—whether they are doubled up, living with family or friends, in cars, abandoned buildings, etc.—are often difficult for educational leaders to identify and, therefore, serve (Hallett, Miller, & Skrla, 2015).

The McKinney-Vento Act requires state education agencies (SEAs) to report the number of homeless students identified by the local education agencies (LEAs) in their states and those numbers are constantly rising (NCHE, 2019). Meanwhile, there is a need for school administrators to recognize the increasing numbers of homeless

students and to “...respond swiftly, collaboratively, and strategically” (Miller & Schreiber, 2012, p. 181).

United States schools have historically failed students living in poverty and children of color who disproportionately live in poverty (Lomotey, 1990; Milner, 2016b; Valencia, 1997, 2010). Students who are homeless or living in poverty face similar challenges in education as it is difficult for them to experience high quality instruction in effective schools (Milner, 2016b). Educational disparities and systemic inequities including fewer resources for schools in poor neighborhoods, fewer qualified teachers, more first year teachers, and increased tracking into low-level classes all contribute to opportunity gaps (Capper, 2019; Lindsey, 2014; Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). Furthermore, educators often view students living in poverty as the problem themselves (Capper; Milner). However within the school context, it is the responsibility of the LEA to identify, support, and educate homeless youth (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015).

School leaders continue to search for solutions and assistance to improve the educational experiences of homeless students and those living in poverty, as two decades of research has yet to provide distinct answers that meet the needs of students who experience homelessness in very diverse ways (Hallett, Miller, & Skrla, 2015; Riehl, 2000). In past decades, school leaders have sought to treat all students equally, regardless of their identity in often marginalized groups. Now, some school leaders are beginning to acknowledge the necessity to provide more specific, individualized resources for homeless students in accordance with their personal contexts and needs (Riehl).

This paper presents findings of a research study conducted within a course in a principal preparation program to increase aspiring principals’ knowledge and leadership capacity to mitigate issues of poverty and homelessness in schools. The study was conducted in collaboration with the National Center for Homeless Education (n.d.) and SERVE Center (n.d.).

Deficit Thinking

Despite schools’ mission statements asserting “all children can learn,” school leaders and school systems overwhelmingly demonstrate viewing children living in poverty through a deficit-based lens (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001). In fact, deficit thinking remains the dominant paradigm among educators that impacts the school experiences of children living in poverty and children of color. Deficit thinking results in harsher discipline, tracking into low-level classes, under-identifying children living in poverty and children of color as gifted, overrepresentation in special education, and high drop-out and retention rates (Murphy & Tobin, 2012; Stronge & Reed-Victor, 2000; Valencia, 1997, 2010). School leaders often identify alternate rationales for the underperformance of low-income students such as dysfunctional families, poor neighborhoods, genetics, and limited social capital (Khalifa, 2018; Skrla & Scheurich; Valencia).

A study by Kim (2013) found that pre-service teachers held deficit views about homeless students. However, when those teachers engaged in community field-based experiences working with children in homeless shelters, they reflected upon their deficit views and gained a better understanding of the complexities of homelessness, which led to improved professional knowledge and more positive viewpoints toward homeless children.

In a qualitative study, Skrla and Scheurich (2001) found in states with strong accountability systems toward equity (e.g., systems requiring the same academic achievement for all students regardless of race or socioeconomic status), superintendents reported the accountability system influenced a positive shift in their deficit thinking and how they led their school districts. State accountability systems empowered superintendents to combat deficit thinking by, “providing highly visible, irrefutable evidence...that the districts were not serving all children equally well; shifting the political risk...away from the district leadership to the state department of education; forcing superintendents to seek out exemplars of successful classrooms and schools...; causing superintendents to reevaluate deficit views...; and increasing expectations of and higher goals for academic achievement for all groups of children” (p. 243).

A Shift in Focus

Principals can better serve diverse students, such as those experiencing homelessness, by leading socially just schools and promoting inclusivity that refutes assimilation into dominant middle/upper middle class white norms. School leaders who practice leadership for social justice create culturally-responsive school cultures, promote high-quality instructional programs, and build relationships between schools and community agencies (Capper, 2019; Khalifa, 2018; Riehl, 2000). Therefore, principals need a broad understanding of issues associated with student and family poverty and homelessness in order to mitigate issues associated with homelessness both within and outside of the school (Miller & Schreiber, 2012).

For principals to lead or support efforts to best serve homeless students, educators must first address the impact of homelessness on students’ academic success by implementing effective programming such as strengths-based approaches, separating assignments into distinct parts, and offering partial credit for coursework completed. Principals also need to be aware of, and support, connecting homeless students to services that are available outside of the school setting (Murphy & Tobin, 2012). Then, school staff must be intentional about supporting homeless and highly mobile students as they navigate the educational system (Hallett, Miller & Skrla, 2015). Although subject to many of the same risk factors threatening academic and social success, there is some distinction between homeless and highly mobile students. Definitions of highly mobile students range from moving schools more than once per year to more than six times during grades K-12 (Popp, Grant, & Stronge, 2011), whereas the education definition of homelessness is based on the students’ nighttime living situation (U. S. Department of Education, 2016a). Principals and teachers need to be trained on issues that homeless and highly mobile students face as well as on legal protections that are provided to homeless students under the McKinney-Vento Act (Hallett, Miller & Skrla, 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2012; U. S. Department of Education, 2016b).

Wraparound Services

One way principals can support homeless youth is through fostering and sustaining wraparound services and other collaborative efforts of school personnel and outside agencies that work toward similar goals, often with the same children and families (Miller, 2011b; Murphy & Tobin, 2012). Wraparound services involve the student and family to develop a plan to support the student with a network that is “community based, culturally relevant, family centered, and individualized to meet the needs of youth” (Jennings, 2019; Yohannan, Carlson, Shepherd, & Batsche-McKenzie, 2017). Principals and staff cannot best serve homeless students if they are working in isolation within their own organization. Homeless students benefit from the coordinated efforts

of mutually responsive professionals across organizations (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015; Riehl, 2000; Yohannan, et al., 2017). School collaborations with different organizations that support students experiencing homelessness and those living in poverty may positively impact the academic and social success of these students. Informing parents of available resources and having affirmative teacher interactions with students and parents are other components that positively contribute to the success of homeless and low-income students (Milner, 2016a).

Poverty is socially constructed yet materially real. People experience living in poverty in a myriad of ways (Milner, 2016b). Each homeless student and their living arrangement is unique, so there should be a contextual response to best serve each student (Miller & Schreiber, 2012). Schools primarily focus on growing the human capital of students by improving grades and test scores. However, schools fail to focus on growing the social capital of homeless students and families, which pertains to relationships, knowledge of resources, and the ability to navigate systems (Khalifa, 2018). Homeless students are often more isolated from supportive relationships such as family, friends, and teachers; further hindering their ability to achieve social capital (Miller, Pavlakis, Samartino, & Bourgeois, 2014). Therefore, more support is needed since the ability of homeless students and those living in poverty to achieve social capital is inhibited by limited access to opportunities and resources (Milner, 2016a). Developing relationships among parents and school personnel is one way to increase the social capital and access to information and resources of marginalized students (Khalifa).

Scholars who have studied issues of homelessness in schools agree that there is a need for school, community, and agency leaders to collaborate to better ameliorate issues that homeless students and families encounter in schools (Riehl, 2000). Murphy and Tobin (2012) identified six ways in which schools can best support homeless students: “(1) developing awareness about homelessness and homeless youth, (2) attending to basic needs, (3) creating an effective instructional program, (4) developing a stable and supportive environment, (5) providing additional supports, and (6) collaborating with other agencies and organizations” (p. 642).

A study by Miller (2011b) found that not only are homeless students and parents limited in their ability to navigate educational processes, but that school and shelter workers who serve the same families lacked inter-organizational relationships to best support these students and families. Both shelter and school personnel operated within their own work settings, and understood little about the work settings of other professionals invested in serving homeless families and students. Miller asserted the need for communication and “closed social networks” (p. 1098), in which school staff, students and families, and shelter staff develop relationships and networks that promote communication, understanding, and increased social capital. As such, homeless students can benefit more from the communication and advocacy of multiple adults and organizations in their lives rather than from fragmented relationships and advocacy (Hallett, Miller & Skrla, 2015).

Role of the Principal

School administrators may struggle as they work to address inequities in institutions they lead because to do so requires admitting and renouncing inequities that are inherent in United States schools. Thus, school leaders are rarely seen as primary agents of change or key role players in mitigating issues of homelessness in schools (Riehl, 2000). However, schools play a key role in helping homeless students move through their educational experience (Hallett, Skrla & Low, 2015). A post-1990 review of the

homelessness literature by Miller (2011a) cited school social workers, counselors, and homeless liaisons as educational leaders who support homeless students and families. Missing from this literature is the role that other district leaders play. However, it is district leaders such as superintendents and principals who interpret federal policy and put that policy into practice in schools (Hallett, Skrla & Low).

It is the role of the principal to support and evaluate all certified professionals in the school and it is the principal who has the greatest influence on how policies and laws, such as the McKinney-Vento Act are made to mean in their individual school contexts (Riehl, 2000; U. S. Department of Education, 2016a). The principal shapes the extent to which such policies are understood and put into practice in the school building after they are passed through levels of interpretation from the federal level, to states, then to school districts and schools (Hallett, Skrla & Low, 2015). Critical school leaders observe and acknowledge inequities that exist in their schools and create alternative plans of action to advocate for marginalized students and to ameliorate inequities (Bradley-Levine, 2016, Capper, 2019; Khalifa, 2018). The principal has the power and influence to lead the efforts and use his/her position to give greater access, sense of belonging, and opportunity to minoritized students. Principal leadership is essential for inclusive practices to be long-lasting, to ensure that school social workers and counselors are supported, and to ensure that teachers learn how to best support children living in poverty. Through principal leadership, teachers can learn to implement instructional practices that benefit children living in transition or below the poverty line (Khalifa, 2018; Milner, 2016b; Riehl, 2000).

A study by Miller (2011b) found that school leaders' support for homeless students primarily ended after transportation, enrollment, and class placement needs were completed, so no other resources or supports were provided. However, when school leaders have strong relationships with those in community organizations and provide homeless and low-income students with wraparound services, they are able to mitigate issues of poverty and homelessness for their students (Miller et al., 2014; Rafferty, 1997; Yohannan et al., 2017). It is essential for school leaders to provide integrated services and support to foster student academic and social success (Hallett, Skrla & Low, 2015; U. S. Department of Education, 2016b).

Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded in following conceptual framework:

- 1) low income students are poorly served due to school leaders' deficit thinking (Skrla & Scheurich, 2001);
- 2) the marginalization of students will persist unless there are intentional efforts to change deficit thinking and structures (Khalifa, 2018);
- 3) educators must first understand the impact of homelessness on students' academic success in order to lead efforts to best serve homeless students (Murphy & Tobin, 2012);
- 4) inclusive school leadership requires addressing inequities in school experiences among diverse student populations (Capper, 2019);
- 5) principals have the power and influence to lead socially just practices in schools (Riehl, 2000); and
- 6) current National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards for building-level educational leaders that state, "Program completers understand and demonstrate the capability to support the development of responsive practices among teachers and staff so they are able to recognize, confront, and alter institutional biases that result in student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations" (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2018).

The National Center for Homeless Education (n.d.) and the SERVE Center (n.d.) provide training and resources to schools, school districts, and state departments of education throughout the United States. However, research on systemic responses to issues of homeless and highly mobile students is lacking and little is known about how policies are implemented at the school level (Hallett, Skrla & Low, 2015). “Homeless education is an area that is ripe for inquiry and desperate for answers” (Miller, 2011b, p. 1101). Through action and reflection, critical school leaders can recognize and work to ameliorate issues of inequity in schools (Bradley-Levine, 2016).

This study seeks to add to extant literature about poverty and homelessness in schools by addressing three research questions:

- 1) What do aspiring school leaders know about working with children living in poverty and homelessness in schools?
- 2) How does targeted instruction, as part of a graduate course, impact MSA students’ knowledge of working with children living in poverty and homelessness in schools?
- 3) How does targeted instruction on poverty and homelessness impact aspiring leaders’ leadership capacity to mitigate issues of poverty and homelessness in schools?

Methodology

Context of the Study

This study was conducted in a public, regional comprehensive university in the southeast United States. Study participants consisted of 26 Masters in School Administration students from two different cohorts, all seeking principal licensure. Students were enrolled in *History, Sociology, and Philosophy of Education*; an online course delivered via Blackboard in the Spring 2018 semester. Staff from the SERVE Center at UNC Greensboro, which has housed the National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) since its inception in 1998, led three 1.5 hour, synchronous online sessions along with facilitation and participation by the educational leadership course professor and a practicing school social worker who is a former school district homeless education liaison. Collaboration for this study between the educational leadership professor and NCHE/SERVE staff was initiated by conversations between the current, aforementioned, practicing school social worker and the professor. The professor, having been a principal who had recently entered academia, knew that formal training related to supporting students and families experiencing homelessness and living in poverty was lacking in job-embedded administrator training and was missing from principal preparation programs as well. The social worker, having served formerly as a homeless liaison, facilitated initial introductions with NCHE/SERVE staff and the researchers created a team to develop and study this learning experience for aspiring school leaders. Because of our varied roles and perspectives (professor/principal, school social worker, national homeless experts and trainers) the “team” was able to provide varying perspectives during the online sessions to promote student learning regarding complexities and support available when serving homeless students and in leading schools and supporting student support staff.

The team identified the following four learning objectives and developed content and activities targeted to the learning objectives for the three online sessions:

- 1) summarize the purpose and key requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act;
- 2) identify the major risk factors for children and youth experiencing homelessness being successful in school and life;

- 3) identify public and private supports and collaborative opportunities that can be utilized to provide supports and services to children and youth experiencing homelessness; and
- 4) articulate your philosophy for mitigating the impacts of homelessness so that children and youth have a positive educational experience and are successful academically.

The three, synchronous sessions provided content that addressed and complemented the learning objectives of the principal preparation course which was based on the work of Spring (2018). The course included units on historical, political, economic, and social goals of schooling; education and equality of opportunity; and student diversity, multiculturalism, and multilingualism. Participation in the sessions was obligatory; however, participation in the study was completely voluntary. None of the data collected were used in calculation of student scores for the course and the course instructor did not receive final survey results until after grades had been posted.

Sample

There were 26 study participants (19 female and 7 male). All were all current, certified educators enrolled in a Masters in School Administration program and they represented eighteen counties in the state in which the study occurred. At the time of this study, four students were serving as administrators, 20 were classroom teachers, one was an instructional coach, and one was a school counselor. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of years of experience among participants with the highest number of students (34.62%) reported having six to ten years of experience in education. The next highest span of experience was 16-20 years with 30.77% of students.

Table 1

Number of Years in Education

Number of Years in Education	%
0-5 years	15.38%
6-10 years	34.62%
11-15 years	15.38%
16-20 years	30.77%
20+ years	3.85%

More than half (53.85%) of participating students reported that their primary educational experience had been at the elementary school level while 46.15% reported primarily working at the secondary school level. No students reported working at the pre-school education level. The distribution of students in various types of school settings was fairly evenly distributed with the same number of participants reported serving in rural and suburban settings (34.62% each), and slightly fewer participants serving in an urban setting (30.76%).

Data Collection and Analysis

The team, led by NCHE/SERVE staff, developed pre- and post-surveys. Pre-survey responses were used formatively to gauge learning needs and the post-survey was used summatively to measure changes in learning.

Participants were asked ten questions on both the pre- and post-surveys related to their role in their school/district and their level of knowledge about children and youth experiencing homelessness. These questions included information about the risk factors and impacts on students' learning, federal law, legislative requirements for providing supports and services to students experiencing homelessness, professional development

on poverty or homelessness provided within the past year, and ideas for leadership practices to mitigate the impacts of homelessness. Participants were also asked about knowledge of resources and additional supports available in their school context (i.e., homeless liaison, school social worker, school counselor, other professional development opportunities).

Participants were asked an additional 18 questions on both the pre- and post-surveys to gauge their perceived readiness to lead and implement practices to mitigate the impact of homelessness and to improve services to students. A five-point Likert scale was used in which 5 indicated the highest level of perceived readiness and 1 the lowest level of perceived readiness (5 = I have leadership ideas for implementing policies either to mitigate impacts or improve services in my school or district; 4 = I am knowledgeable enough to help lead my school; 3 = I understand the implications 2 = I have some knowledge of, and 1 = I do not know yet).

Two weeks prior to the start of the three sessions, the course instructor issued an email requesting all students to take the pre-survey. The survey was accessible via a common link. Twenty-five students (92.6%) took the initial pre-survey. Utilizing self-reported responses on the pre-survey, the team examined the baseline of aspiring leaders' knowledge and understanding of poverty and homelessness in schools and developed learning outcomes for the online sessions.

Within a two weeks after the end of the series, students were issued a post-survey asking the same questions as in the pre-survey to gauge their level of learning. Again, the course instructor sent an email for students to access the survey via a common link. Twenty-six (100%) students completed the post-survey. Additional open-ended questions were included in the post-survey to ascertain how students anticipated using knowledge gained to inform their future roles as school leaders in working to mitigate the negative impacts of homelessness on students. Questions related to student satisfaction were also included in the post-survey to inform the development and improvement of future NCHE/SERVE and principal preparation program collaborative projects.

Session 1: Risk Factors and Impact

Prior to Session 1, students were given a written assignment to review the school's community relations/outreach/partnership with their respective principal-mentors. Students reflected on and responded to the following questions: What types of partnerships and community outreach activities does your school engage in? Why? What is the reason or purpose for the partnerships? Identify public and private supports and collaborative opportunities that can be utilized to provide supports and services to children and youth experiencing homelessness. Which collaborations/partnerships could yield community-based support for students experiencing homelessness? Think about non-academic needs such as extracurricular activities, proms, celebratory field trips, food, housing support, etc.

Session 1 described family and youth homelessness and discussed risk factors such as family conflict, domestic violence, abuse and neglect, high mobility, unaccompanied youth, balancing employment and school, child welfare and juvenile justice involvement, immigrants and refugees, LGBTQ, parental incarceration, substance abuse, and mental health issues. Session 1 also focused on how homelessness can affect academic and life outcomes through chronic absenteeism, dropout/graduation rates, trafficking, and chronic poverty. Then, the session informed students of the history and purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act and its legal definition of homelessness, support for students including school and LEA responsibilities, and how administrators can

provide support through collaborations with education programs like Title I, Foster Care, and Special Education, and referrals to community organizations.

For Session 1, students were assigned student profiles based on real life experiences of homeless students. Participants were encouraged to take on the role of the student in their profile as they discussed information and scenarios related to family and youth homelessness. After the session, students participated in groups in an online discussion board. Participants introduced the student from their student profile and answered questions such as: What were your student's challenges? What school and community resources might be appropriate? How can you connect the student to the needed services? Are there any barriers to making that connection? Describe any other thoughts or key insights you had.

Assignments to support learning in Session 1 and prepare students for Session 2 included watching a video about a child taken into foster care and completing the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study (ACE) questionnaire. Students' ACE scores were used for personal reflection only. Students also completed two written assignments:

- Interview a school social worker, student support provider, or homeless education liaison. What is their role? What does a typical day look like for them? Summarize the purpose of key requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act. How do the LEA and your school serve homeless students? Does your district receive McKinney-Vento subgrant funds? What did you learn from the school social worker/homeless liaison/student support provider that you did not know before the interview?
- Analyze the Title I program and other federal or state funded programs in the school. What is the legislation supporting the funding? What is the intent? What are the requirements that must be followed in order for services to be received? How is the Title I, Part A setaside funding used to serve homeless students? Is the amount appropriate for the level of poverty in the community? Provide a breakdown of the percentage of students receiving funding/services as a result of this legislation.

Session 2: Identifying and Responding to Trauma in Schools

Session 2 focused on defining and identifying the effects of trauma. Students learned about ACEs and how having higher ACE scores leads to negative health and well-being outcomes. NCHE/SERVE staff discussed different types of traumatic situations, the impact of trauma on brain development, learning and behavior, and the compounding effects of trauma on highly mobile students. Trauma-informed practices, discipline through a trauma-informed lens, and building resilience in students were addressed as were possible trauma triggers in schools and how educators can help students regulate their emotions and behaviors.

A discussion board assignment after Session 2 allowed participants to reflect upon newly learned information and apply it to school leadership practice. Questions included:

- 1) As a school administrator, how can you create a safe, whole-school environment for children who believe the world (especially authority figures) are not trustworthy? Consider classrooms, cafeteria, athletics, playgrounds, hallways, buses, restrooms, etc. – every facet of the school.

- 2) Reflect on a situation that resulted in student discipline in which the student's behavior may have been related to trauma. As a school administrator, how might you respond differently utilizing a trauma-informed approach?
- 3) As a school administrator, discuss the appropriateness and feasibility of involving the school counselor and/or school social worker as you make decisions regarding student discipline.
- 4) How might the utilization of a well-structured behavioral expectations system, such as Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) benefit students or adversely impact individuals who are responding to trauma?

Students were also required to attend a school board meeting and complete a written assignment. Components of the assignment included noting micro-political issues; how meeting agenda items and outcomes affect teachers, students, and families; and noting references to homeless students or students living in poverty (or where references could/should have been referenced but were not).

Session 3: Needs Assessments and Presentations

Prior to Session 3, aspiring school leaders conducted a Local Education Agency (LEA) Informal Needs Assessment using Standards & Indicators for Quality LEA McKinney-Vento Programs (NCHE, 2017; NCHE, 2018). Students then used the needs assessment, standards & indicators, and information learned throughout the three sessions, course readings, and assignments to create a digital presentation to present in their schools or school district. This digital presentation was a required, graded course project. Components of school/district plans included identifying the number of students in the LEA, the number of homeless students, and the number of students living in poverty. Participants were asked to note: 1) strengths of their school's/LEA's Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) Program; 2) challenges of their school's/LEA's EHCY Program; 3) ways, as educational leaders, they would like to improve the EHCY program in their school; and 4) ways, as educational leaders, they would like to improve the EHCY program in their LEA. In Session 3, students presented their plans to classmates and were encouraged to use their presentations to educate faculty and staff in their own schools or districts. By the end of the semester, three students reported presenting to their school staff while several others reported intent to present their findings to their school staff in the 2018-19 school year.

Findings

Students noted that the sessions provided during the EDL 617: *History, Sociology and Philosophy of Education* course were significant in their training as formal school leaders because, prior to this course, they received little to no professional development (PD) related to poverty and culture of students experiencing homelessness from their districts or schools.

One student commented:

The entire process was eye-opening. My school has never offered training on homeless educational strategies and has only once offered training on trauma. I have been pushing for more PD in our school.

Another student noted:

The information provided helped me to understand where to start when addressing homelessness. It was also beneficial to get input from other future administrators in my LEA and other LEAs.

Student responses to questions about the number of times they were provided with professional development opportunities to learn about culture and poverty or about homelessness in the prior school year reflect a significant deficiency in these two areas. Fifty-nine percent of students reported receiving no professional development at all on homelessness, while 48% reported not receiving any professional development on culture and poverty.

Nearly 60% of students indicated that most of the professional development on topics related to at-risk students was provided by the school, while nearly 30% reported training was provided by the district. One student noted that professional development was provided by the Regional Education Service Alliance in their area and another student noted that professional development was provided by both the district and the school.

Table 2 shows the rank order (highest to lowest) in which students responded that they “did not know yet” about specific homelessness-related topics. A five point Likert scale was used to rate participants’ readiness to lead efforts related to poverty and homelessness in their schools (5 = I have leadership ideas for implementing policies either to mitigate impacts or improve services in my school or district, 4 = I am knowledgeable enough to help lead my school regarding, 3 = I understand the implications of, 2 = I have some knowledge of, 1 = I do not know yet).

As shown in Table 2, in the pre-survey there were four of the 18 statements in which all of the participants indicated having some knowledge of the topic. 0% indicated “I do not know yet” the role of the school counselor; factors that identify a student as “at-risk”; how homelessness can affect academic and life outcomes; and how experiencing trauma can influence the behavior of students, parents, and staff. Students indicated the least amount of knowledge in topics related to the number of homeless students in their school district; the role of the homeless liaison; transportation procedures for homeless students; and the purpose, definition, and requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act. They also indicated little knowledge about procedures to identify students who may be homeless. Responses to the post-survey reflect that all students indicated knowing information about all of the topics.

Table 2

“I Do Not Know Yet” Responses

	Pre-Survey (n=25)	Post-Survey (n=26)
I do not know yet.		
13. the number of students in my school (or district) who are homeless.	44.00%	0.00%
3. the role of the homeless liaison.	40.00%	0.00%
16. the transportation procedures at my school (or district) related to serving students experiencing homelessness.	36.00%	0.00%
8. the purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act.	32.00%	0.00%
9. the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homelessness.	32.00%	0.00%
10. the McKinney-Vento Act requirements pertaining to identifying and supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness.	32.00%	0.00%
15. what procedures are in place in my school (or district) to identify students who may be homeless.	32.00%	0.00%
18. how homeless students and families can be connected to community resources beyond what the school/district can provide.	24.00%	0.00%

	Pre-Survey (n=25)	Post-Survey (n=26)
I do not know yet.		
14. the number of students in my school (or district) who live in poverty.	20.00%	0.00%
12. how to utilize trauma-informed practices.	16.00%	0.00%
7. the laws, policies, and practices designed to protect the confidentiality of a student's living situation.	12.00%	0.00%
17. the personnel in my school (or district) who should be involved when developing policies, procedures, and services that may impact children and youth experiencing homelessness.	12.00%	0.00%
1. the role of the social worker.	4.00%	0.00%
5. the risk factors children and youth experiencing homelessness face.	4.00%	0.00%
2. the role of the school counselor.	0.00%	0.00%
4. factors that identify a student as "at-risk."	0.00%	0.00%
6. how homelessness can affect academic and life outcomes.	0.00%	0.00%
11. how experiencing trauma can influence the behavior of students, parents, and staff.	0.00%	0.00%

As shown in Table 3, post-survey responses reflected an increase in level of understanding for all 18 statements, with an average shift in mean score of 1.74. The greatest shift was to question 9 which related to "understanding the definition of the McKinney-Vento Act" with a difference in mean score of 2.37. This was followed by a 2.26 shift in mean score of question 13, "knowing the number of students in my school or district who are homeless." Four other questions had a shift in mean score greater than 2.0: "how homeless students and families can be connected to community resources beyond what the school/district can provide" (2.18); "the purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act" (2.14); "the McKinney-Vento Act requirements pertaining to identifying and supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness" (2.11); and "the role of the homeless liaison" (2.07). The smallest shift was on Question 2 related to "the role of the school counselor" with a difference in mean score of .99.

Table 3

Knowledge of Information and Available Support to work with Children Living in Poverty and Homelessness

	Pre-Survey Mean (n=25)	Post Survey Mean (n=26)
To what degree do you understand...		
1. the role of the social worker.	3.04	4.38
2. the role of the school counselor.	3.36	4.35
3. the role of the homeless liaison.	2.16	4.23
4. factors that identify a student as "at-risk."	3.36	4.42
5. the risk factors children and youth experiencing homelessness face.	3.04	4.58
6. how homelessness can affect academic and life outcomes.	3.28	4.65
7. the laws, policies, and practices designed to protect the confidentiality of a student's living situation.	2.76	4.19
8. the purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act.	2.36	4.50
9. the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homelessness.	2.32	4.69
10. the McKinney-Vento Act requirements pertaining to identifying and supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness.	2.24	4.35
11. how experiencing trauma can influence the behavior of students, parents, and staff.	3.40	4.65
12. how to utilize trauma-informed practices.	2.60	4.42
13. the number of students in my school (or district) who are homeless.	2.24	4.50

To what degree do you understand...	Pre-Survey Mean (n=25)	Post Survey Mean (n=26)
14. the number of students in my school (or district) who live in poverty.	2.72	4.50
15. what procedures are in place in my school (or district) to identify students who may be homeless.	2.40	4.38
16. the transportation procedures at my school (or district) related to serving students experiencing homelessness.	2.48	4.27
17. the personnel in my school (or district) who should be involved when developing policies, procedures, and services that may impact children and youth experiencing homelessness.	2.56	4.42
18. how homeless students and families can be connected to community resources beyond what the school/district can provide.	2.32	4.50

As part of the pre- and post-surveys, students were asked to rate their level of readiness to lead policy planning and implementation efforts to mitigate the impacts of homelessness or improve services for students experiencing homelessness. Table 4 shows, in rank order (lowest to highest), the percent of students who indicated that they felt they had “leadership ideas for implementing policies (either to mitigate impacts or improve services) in my school (or district).”

As reflected in Table 4, in the pre-survey there were five areas in which no students reported having leadership ideas: the role of the homeless liaison, the purpose, definition, and requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act, and the number of homeless students in their school or district. The percentage of students expressing leadership ideas in all other areas was considerably low. In seven areas, 4% responded they have leadership ideas, in five areas 8% reported they have leadership ideas, and in one area “factors that identify students “at-risk” only 20% of respondents indicated they have leadership ideas in the pre-survey. Student responses on the post-survey reflect a shift in ideas to convey and implement policies for supporting students experiencing homelessness. Of greatest significance is the reported gain in leadership ideas to lead or implement policies related to the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homelessness (from 0% to 73%). The gain in leadership ideas related to how homelessness can affect academic and life outcomes moved from 8% to 69.23%. Similarly, how experiencing trauma can influence the behavior of students, parents, and staff was also an 8% to 69.23% gain. Finally of note from the pre-survey is that 0% of respondents reported having leadership ideas related to the purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act while nearly 54% reported having leadership ideas to mitigate or improve services in the post-survey.

Table 4

“I have leadership ideas for implementing policies (either to mitigate impacts or improve services) in my school (or district)”

I have leadership ideas for implementing policies (either to mitigate impacts or improve services) in my school (or district)	Pre-Survey Response (n=25)	Post-Survey Response (n=26)
3. the role of the homeless liaison.	0.00%	30.77%
8. the purpose of the McKinney-Vento Act.	0.00%	53.85%
9. the McKinney-Vento Act definition of homelessness.	0.00%	73.08%

I have leadership ideas for implementing policies (either to mitigate impacts or improve services) in my school (or district)	Pre-Survey Response (n=25)	Post-Survey Response (n=26)
10. the McKinney-Vento Act requirements pertaining to identifying and supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness.	0.00%	38.46%
13. the number of students in my school (or district) who are homeless.	0.00%	61.45%
7. the laws, policies, and practices designed to protect the confidentiality of a student's living situation.	4.00%	30.77%
12. how to utilize trauma-informed practices.	4.00%	53.85%
14. the number of students in my school (or district) who live in poverty.	4.00%	57.69%
15. what procedures are in place in my school (or district) to identify students who may be homeless.	4.00%	46.15%
16. the transportation procedures at my school (or district) related to serving students experiencing homelessness.	4.00%	42.31%
17. the personnel in my school (or district) who should be involved when developing policies, procedures, and services that may impact children and youth experiencing homelessness.	4.00%	50.00%
18. how homeless students and families can be connected to community resources beyond what the school/district can provide.	4.00%	53.85%
1. the role of the social worker.	8.00%	46.15%
2. the role of the school counselor.	8.00%	50.00%
5. the risk factors children and youth experiencing homelessness face.	8.00%	61.54%
6. how homelessness can affect academic and life outcomes.	8.00%	69.23%
11. how experiencing trauma can influence the behavior of students, parents, and staff.	8.00%	69.23%
4. factors that identify a student as "at-risk."	20.00%	61.54%

Three open-ended questions were added to the post-survey. The first question asked, *"Please describe how you will use the information you gained during the sessions on homeless education to lead, develop, and implement policies in your school (or district) to mitigate the impacts of homelessness on student learning."*

Five themes emerged in response to this question: 1) collaboration within the school/school district, 2) providing professional development to school staff, 3) outreach to the community, 4) inform policies or systems, and 5) accessibility/advocacy for homeless youth and children living in poverty.

Key quotes related to collaboration within the school/school district included:

I have met with school leadership to make plans for our school. I collaborated with our school social worker to develop a professional development session to do at our next faculty meeting in May. It identifies resources available and school and district data. It also has activities where staff can work together to develop a plan of action to address a need at our school. It also highlights the work that our social worker does with our homeless population.

I have gained several tools while participating in the homeless education sessions. I discovered these by being informed on where to go for assistance and support in my LEA. I will now be able to provide resources to others and direct them to the people in our LEA that can assist them further.

The sessions helped me see the interconnectedness of services and programs already being implemented in our district/school and how they relate to homeless students and families.

I am planning to meet with our district homeless liaison on Monday to talk through some of the ideas that were shared.

Key quotes related to providing professional development to staff included:

I've learned that all staff need to be aware of best strategies to serve homeless students. I will use the information gained to create and present an information session about these strategies for ALL staff (not just classroom teachers), but more importantly, the session will be interactive and allow staff to voice their opinions and ideas, so they take ownership of their part in serving homeless students.

As a future educational leader, I will use this knowledge to make sure that my staff are educated regarding students living in poverty and homelessness.

I really enjoyed session two on trauma-informed instruction. I would love to provide schools in our district with professional development on these practices to be able to best support students facing trauma.

Key quotes related to outreach to the community included:

Building relationships with community resources is imperative to helping families access the necessary services.

I will use the information gained by sharing it with the staff at my school and communicating resources with parents.

I also feel I have seen how important it is to track the success of what we are doing and communicate with our community to enlist more support as needed.

Key quotes related to informing policies and systems included:

My district does not have well defined framework or procedures. I would use this knowledge to formalize the process of identification and implementation of necessary resources.

I plan to use our needs assessment with my staff to better evaluate and improve our current systems regarding poverty and homelessness.

The information gained through this course has given me knowledge to understand that WE (the school system) often do not know what is taking place in a student's life and that it is important to use thorough communication, so we can better understand their needs and how to accommodate those needs.

Key quotes related to increasing accessibility and advocacy for homeless students included:

I will also be better able to advocate for my students requiring these services and ensure that they have full access to all school programs.
As an administrator I can advocate for students and inform teachers.

(I will make) sure that warning signs are recognized and procedures for homeless students are accessible for all.

In the second open-ended question students were asked, *“Was there a session or activity that was especially helpful to your understanding of the implications of homelessness or other trauma on the development of children and youth experiencing homelessness? If so, please describe.”*

Five themes emerged among students’ responses regarding the most influential session or activity for their learning. These sessions or activities included: the McKinney-Vento law and how to identify homelessness, trauma, the relationship between school administrators and the homeless liaison and school social worker, role playing and collectively sharing strategies to lead, and the interaction with NCHE/SERVE professionals. In general, students commented on the first two sessions the most, noting the depth of information the presenters provided and the opportunity to engage in activities.

Key quotes relating to understanding homelessness, trauma, and the ACE activity include the following:

Session 1 and 2 were great sessions because it started with a broad understanding of homelessness and McKinney-Vento and moved into specific strategies.

I thought the video [on trauma-informed care] we watched prior to the foster care segment was extremely powerful. However, each session was well planned out and gave opportunity to acknowledge how the information gained can be applied to best benefit students.

[The ACE activity was]...enlightening for me, especially knowing the situations of many of my students.

Students noted appreciating the opportunity to connect with their peers to discuss topics in real-time and on the discussion board. One student reported, the most beneficial activity was “...meeting personally with our county homelessness liaison and developing the power point resource/training for teachers to use.”

A third open-ended question asked students, *“Please describe any topics related to students experiencing homelessness for which you feel you need more information to complete your knowledge and ability to lead.”*

Participants indicated they wanted more information related to ongoing training, community resources, and LEA information.

Specific participant quotes related to on-going training included:

I need authentic practice with assisting students and families dealing with homelessness and/or poverty.

Any information on trauma and poverty would always be helpful. Mental illness is also an issue at our school.

I feel so much of this is continual and you must always be seeking to learn more so you can help all students in their differing situations and circumstances.

Specific student quotes related to wanting more knowledge about community resources included:

I think it would be helpful to have us (the students) include a list of resources/outside agencies to call upon.

I would love to know more about what resources are available in my county for homeless students.

Information about interactions about DSS [Department of Social Services]. When do we involve them and when do we not involve them when working with our homeless populations?

Specific student quotes related to more desired LEA information included:

I would like to have more information on how McKinney-Vento laws are monitored at the county level to ensure that all schools are serving these children.

Determining the resources that are available and used in my school and district.

I would also like to know more about how my county is dealing with the problem of homelessness.

Student Satisfaction

Students were asked to respond to five questions to indicate to what degree the series met the learning objectives established for the three-part series. A five-point Likert scale was used (5=Strongly Agree; 4=Agree; 3=Neutral; 2=Disagree; and 1=Strongly Disagree). One hundred percent of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that the three sessions were engaging and prompted interest and better understanding of the key requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act.

Table 5 reflects a high level of agreement that the three-part series addressed the learning objectives.

Table 5

Student Satisfaction

To what degree to you agree with the following statements about the three sessions on homelessness.	Mean (n=25)
1. fit with the overall learning objectives of this course.	4.72
2. engaged me and prompted my interest in better understanding the key requirements of the McKinney-Vento Act.	4.80
3. helped me to understand the major risk factors for children and youth experiencing homelessness.	4.68

4. helped me identify public and private supports and collaborative opportunities that can be utilized to provide supports and services to children and youth experiencing homelessness.	4.60
5. helped me to begin developing a philosophy for mitigating the impacts of homelessness so that children and youth have a more positive educational experience and are academically successful.	4.68

Students offered some suggestions for how they thought some aspects of the series could be improved. One student noted they would have liked to see the presenters participate in the discussion boards.

The role-playing experience was most beneficial. But I wish our program guests could have contributed to the Blackboard discussions.

One student suggested that smaller group report-outs may have allowed for discussions about discerning best practices.

Although I understand limitations of time and human resources, if Session 3 could have been structured in small groups with direct feedback from other members and facilitators, I would have gotten more out of it. It was hard to know which ideas being presented would be best-practice and applicable to my school/district because there was so much information to take in. I am still working to create my presentation but analyzing others' ideas in detail has been helpful to shape my final, lasting understanding of the best way to serve homeless students.

Discussion

This study attempted to increase the leadership capacity of aspiring school leaders and their knowledge and understanding of homeless youth and children living in poverty. Poverty and homelessness are issues that public schools will continue to face and it is the school's responsibility to identify, support, and educate homeless students (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015). Murphy and Tobin (2011) argued, "...schools must be a hallmark element in any attack on the homeless problem" (p. 34).

Prior to this study, participants' knowledge of the McKinney-Vento Act and supports were limited. While aspiring administrators in this study have been educators from four to 20 years, many did not know basic information about how poverty and homelessness impacts students' experience in school. These findings support research by Murphy and Tobin (2012) that educators must first understand the impact of homelessness on students' academic success in order to lead efforts to best serve homeless students. Through focused online sessions, group and individual reflection in discussion boards, videos, experiential learning, and written assignments; participants reported increased leadership capacity to mitigate issues of homelessness and lead more socially just schools.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings indicate a need for principal preparation programs to specifically educate aspiring school administrators on issues of poverty and homelessness in schools. Principal preparation programs can frontload aspiring school leaders' knowledge of issues of poverty and homelessness by building on educators' prior knowledge and growing them toward leadership dispositions in which they can better mitigate these issues as they lead schools.

Other implications for practice relate to the importance of and need to strengthen the relationship between district homeless liaisons and school administrators. Additionally, school administrators need to build relationships with community agencies that are serving the same students and families so that collaborative efforts provide greater benefits to those served. Wraparound services (Jennings, 2019; Miller, 2011b; Yohannan et al., 2017) can edify support provided to students and families experiencing homelessness and living in poverty as schools and community agencies work collaboratively rather than in independent silos.

Limitations

Some limitations exist in this study. First, a small sample size limits its generalizability. Second, there are limitations to issuing pre- and post-surveys in that often people don't know what they don't know. Therefore, in some cases people may over-estimate what they know in the pre-survey and then underestimate what they have learned in the post-survey because they realize that while they have learned a great deal, the topic is much more complex and there is an even greater amount still to be learned. Another limitation is that the data is self-reported and not skills or knowledge assessed data. Nevertheless, the pre- and post-survey responses seem to indicate a very positive learning trend.

Areas for Future Research

Replication studies in this or other educational leadership programs would add information to the validity and generalizability of this study's findings. The participants in this study are aspiring school leaders. Of interest would be a follow-up study once these educators have moved into formal school leadership positions to assess their leadership practices to mitigate issues of poverty and homelessness in schools. An examination of administrators' relationships and support of school social workers, homeless liaisons, and school counselors would also add to the knowledge base of leading socially just schools. Replication studies may include a stronger focus on deficit thinking and implicit bias among educators in the beginning of the series. Time constraints did not permit the NCHE/SERVE staff to guide students through a deep analysis of Local Educational Agency Informal Needs Assessment (NCHE, 2018) prior to students using this tool. Replication studies may place a greater emphasis on the LEA needs assessment. In additional studies, NCHE/SERVE staff may participate more in the student discussion boards since, as reported by students, they felt the interaction and feedback from NCHE/SERVE professionals was instrumental for growth and understanding. Finally, the use of student profiles based on real life student situations was meaningful for participants to better understand and empathize with homeless students. We recommend this teaching strategy for any replication studies.

Conclusion

In this study, we sought to learn what aspiring school leaders know about working with students experiencing poverty and homelessness; how targeted instruction, as part of a graduate course, impacts MSA students' knowledge of working with children in schools who are experiencing poverty and homelessness; and how targeted instruction on poverty and homelessness impacts aspiring leaders' leadership capacity to mitigate issues of poverty and homelessness in schools. Based on the findings, the researchers recommend targeted learning outcomes in principal preparation programs to increase the knowledge and leadership capacity of aspiring school leaders to mitigate issues of poverty and homelessness in schools. We found that aspiring school leaders' knowledge of homelessness and poverty in schools was lacking, and participants' perceptions of their leadership capacity to mitigate issues of poverty and homelessness increased after targeted instruction. If principal preparation programs can frontload information and address deficit thinking among aspiring administrators, we are hopeful that these

principals will more ably understand and address the homelessness and poverty that exists in their schools and districts and, as a result, lead more socially just schools as part of a broader social justice effort.

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