

Bank Street College of Education

Educate

Graduate Student Independent Studies

Summer 7-15-2020

A guide for teacher sensitivity of the homeless preschooler

Barbara Abdella

Bank Street College of Education, babdella@bankstreet.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/independent-studies>



Part of the [Curriculum and Social Inquiry Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Educational Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Abdella, B. (2020). A guide for teacher sensitivity of the homeless preschooler. *New York : Bank Street College of Education*. Retrieved from <https://educate.bankstreet.edu/independent-studies/257>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Independent Studies by an authorized administrator of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

A Guide for Teacher Sensitivity of the
Homeless Preschooler

by

Barbara J. Abdella

Early Childhood Advanced Standing Program

Mentor: Nilda Bayron-Resnick

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Master of Early Childhood Education

Bank Street College of Education

2020

Abstract

This paper is intended to exhibit the effects of homelessness on preschool children and to provide anecdotes for the child's social emotional growth and well-being. This paper provides a statistical analysis of the steady growth of homelessness among preschool children and families residing in New York City, lists some of the causes of homelessness, and identifies barriers that homeless children and their families must face daily, affecting their education and stability. Additionally, it is hoped that this paper will allow the reader to comprehend their ability to utilize their empathic reasoning skills and impartial reasoning in their association with homeless children and families, and homelessness in general, from this point forward.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	2
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	3
RATIONALE.....	4
A GUIDE FOR TEACHERS.....	5
ANECDOTES.....	8
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	19
CONCLUSION.....	24
REFERENCES.....	26

Rationale

I've encountered various occurrences throughout my tenure as a teacher, many that leave lasting effects on me. None more important than the other; however, one such occurrence that resonates within me more than others, a homeless preschooler. At the very beginning of my teaching career, I had the privilege of teaching such a child; he and his family, homeless. The deeds that took place throughout that school year impacted me so that I always joined in any efforts that needed to be undertaken in making a family who was unfortunate enough to be left homeless, feel less burdened by the rigors of academia. Observing that this child and his family would be moved from shelter to shelter, oftentimes without being able to gather all of their belongings, was heart wrenching and unacceptable to me. I needed to be that teacher who would not add to their already unimaginably stressful situation of being homeless; I needed to assist in some way. By providing resources to the family which could be utilized to ease some of their existing frustrations; I would put together care packages for the child and his parents. In believing I could provide a source in which the child could feel as if he had something of his own, I would give him something as simple as a car that he could leave in a special place every evening before he left; knowing that when he returned it would be there. I would emerge in essence, that teacher that others would rely on to aid in their efforts to make comfortable children, and families that are homeless. Committing to seeing a child be allowed to grow to his full potential, and to thrive in an academic environment despite his obstacle of being homeless is necessary. For that reason, I need to be proactive in my undertaking of providing a guide in which my fellow educators can utilize; so they too can take part in the practice of making a homeless preschooler feel empowered in his tiny

world. A guide that will provide them with some extraordinarily simplistic designs to support a homeless preschooler's emotional well-being. I am impassioned to provide guidance to my fellow teachers on the subject matter; if but one other teacher can utilize my approach in allowing a homeless preschooler to feel whole, I'd feel accomplished in my efforts.

A Guide for Teachers

From the very moment that a child enters the classroom I have that child's best interests at heart; establishing a relationship that is both trusting and caring with students is essential. "Children benefit socially, emotionally, and academically when teachers intentionally create close, trusting relationships (Palermo et al. 2007)". As teachers we can never guess the hand that we are being dealt each school year; whether we will be faced with many children in need of academic services, or children that will need extended emotional support. The one thing that is certain is that whatever challenges I am faced with, I'm committed to seeing it through until the end.

A homeless child faces numerous challenges that the ordinary preschooler does not. Not having a place to call their own may be the single most obstacle that stands out, however there are a plethora of challenges that he may face. Can you imagine someone telling you to pack your things on a moment's notice; your entire life in just a few minutes? I could only envision myself leaving things behind, whether it be intentional or not; just the thought of leaving something behind that is near and dear to my heart stings immensely. Children grow attached to items easily, especially a favorite toy, or plush animal; it becomes a part of who they are. Leaving such an item behind can have devastating effects on a child's emotional well-being. Research indicates that "children

who are mentally healthy tend to be happier, show greater motivation to learn, have a more positive attitude towards school, more eagerly participate in class activities, and demonstrate higher academic performance than less mentally healthy peers (Hyson 2004; Kostelnik et al. 2015)”.

As trained professionals we oftentimes witness behaviors, or emotions from a child that their parents have not yet been privy to see; or they have been too busy to see, or cannot label. This is where we have to identify what is taking place, so we may assist. For a homeless preschooler, emotions and behavior can run high. With so many inconsistencies, and having to process the fact that my family moves from place to place often; there is little space for him to have alone time, traveling long distances at ungodly hours, not having all of the cool material things that his peers have, and not having proper nourishment, are far too many hurdles for a preschooler to undertake without the emotional support of caring individuals such as teachers.

Why not provide this child with the fundamentals of being a child; in giving this child something to call his own. Providing him with things that he can keep in his cubby, or in a special place within the classroom, is a classic act that could mean a great deal to him. A toy car, a plush animal; even a box of crayons and a small notepad, are but some of the things that a teacher can provide this student with to allow him to feel a sense of belonging to a space for an extended period of time. Those things will be left at the end of the day, yet they will still be there the next day; no worries about anyone taking them, or them being left behind.

We can also provide the child with a small job to partake in daily, such as watering a plant, taking care of the class pet, or the class baby dolls. These tasks may seem minute in

the eyes of some, but can mean the world to a child that doesn't have consistency in their life. After all having something to take care of will aid in his development of having empathy for living things, and learning about cause and effect. Both of which are very valuable lessons to learn early on, and with hopes of cultivating an interest by exposure. Knowing that when he returns to school the next day these items will still be there. Unlike going to a different space each night to sleep, where there are no other familiarities other than your family.

Along with providing the student with a few special items to give him that sense of belonging; we should also be prepared to provide him with the necessities that an academic environment may demand. Creating care packages of items that the student may need while he travels from school to home, and back again. Backpacks that are age appropriate, notebooks, pencils, crayons, construction paper, scissors, markers, and more, are all things that are available to classroom teachers; or are easily obtainable through donations by other parents, or institutions that are able to make a difference. Personally, at the end of each school year I take several trips to stock up on such items to include in my classroom for the next school year; so that in the event that I need to accommodate such a child, I can readily do so.

I've learned throughout my years as a teacher that homelessness for a preschooler can be as painful for the child as it is for the caregivers, in that they do not have the opportunity to make connections with other families. Therefore, the student is unable to form connections, or attachments to people outside of school. Forming attachments is crucial during this stage as a child that feels secure will be able to thrive socially and emotionally. Time and again I've had, and seen children form attachments to teachers; as

we are sensitive and attuned to their needs. Teacher's need to be emotionally available for this student, as he may require more care than that of his peers. There should also be a person or people other than the students caregivers or teachers that can provide such support to him. I've witnessed a child form a relationship with the social worker assigned to his family; a person that he looked forward to talking about with me, and someone he could rely on wholeheartedly.

Anecdotes

I am fortunate in that the agency I work for has a belief system that is in total alignment with mine. The director of the agency in which I work, works tirelessly to ensure that each and every child has the best, and the most memorable experience while attending our school. From September all the way through August, every detail is thought, and planned out meticulously with much effort being given to the fact that the children have valuable experiences, and make meaningful connections to people, and the world in which we live.

Keeping in the forefront of our minds that every family doesn't consist of the same characters so to speak, allowing for significant adaptations to accommodate a child that is homeless is at times necessary. On a day cheerfully known as, "Male Involvement Day", which is held near Father's Day each year, we invite any male figure over the age of eighteen who is influential in the child's life to come to a gathering which is filled with a bevy of activities for everyone. Handing out invitations for one such event, a caregiver was noticeably agitated with the event's title, stating that the child had no father in which to invite. This is where we made clear that the invite does not say, "Father's Day", it says, "Male Involvement"; meaning that any male figure could attend on his behalf. The

caregiver remained steadfast in her decision that she wouldn't allow her child to partake, as there were no male figures in his life that could readily attend. She understandably didn't want to place her child in an awkward situation which would leave her to possibly have to tackle a tough conversation or unwanted behavior later on. Meanwhile her son is off having a hearty play session with one of our male social service personnel; who would then graciously ask if he could stand in as a representative of her absent family members. "You would do that?", states his caregiver, with a smile. "Of course", was his reply. This act of kindness is but yet one of the few feats that take place at the agency in which I work. Lending ourselves to causes to ensure that a child who does not have, will feel included.

Practicing inclusivity is a core value of our agency. We never exclude anyone. One of my earliest memories was being given the opportunity to shop for clothing to have at our disposal for the children of our homeless families. One of the events I got to shop for was what we call our "Annual Spring or Winter Ball"; which is alternated each school year. All of our events are held for a purpose. The purpose for this event is to allow children to feel special about themselves, and to expose them to various gatherings that they may encounter later in their lives. For this event children, and staff members are expected to wear formal attire for a day that is solely for the children; we are there to cater to them, serving food, and playing games at a venue. Justifiably most children have this type of clothing available, as their parents dress them for religious services, birthday parties, and other gatherings. A homeless child may not readily have clothing for day to day interactions let alone a formal event. Again, we are all about inclusivity; no child is ever left with a feeling of sadness over being unable to take part in an event or activity. Past

and present caregivers from our agency also take pride in contributing to the cause of others by donating their children's gently used clothing for others to make use of. I can recall such a day where I took a little girl, who was homeless, to the office to pick from some dresses to wear to our annual ball. "Wow!", she exclaimed looking at the fancy dresses. "I like this one", she said. "Well then it's yours", says our social service personnel. She turned to look at me, eyes wide, with the biggest of grins I had ever seen. She hugs the social service person, and then me, saying, "thank you, I'm going to be so pretty!", and that she was. These are the moments when one can process the true meaning of fostering a child's social emotional well-being. I couldn't imagine working at a place that held events as such without giving thought to our children that are in need. For this reason, my workplace's pedagogy is meaningful to me, it states as follows; "students learn best when they are engaged according to their interests, strengths, and learning styles. As educators, we have to make adjustments to keep them engaged. This happens when teachers have patience, when activities are planned (informed), when teachers are nurturing yet firm, and extend a child's thinking and language".

In light of the unfortunate turn of events throughout this school year with Covid 19, the novel Corona Virus; we are suddenly and sadly in the throes of seeing more of our school's community being pushed to the brink of homelessness. Families have been left unable to work, and therefore can no longer provide the necessities that we depend upon to survive. One would have to understand why this is so; the demographic that we serve, being a Head Start, is one that is vulnerable to a transition of being unable to remain gainfully employed. On the list of criteria that has to be met in order for a child to be enrolled in a Head Start program, homelessness is first on the list; they take precedence

over all others. With a family of four, the income maximum to be eligible for a Head Start program is \$26,200 per year; losing an income no matter how much is a strain on a family; losing an income that was barely fit for a family of that size is detrimental.

Outreach began long before our doors were shuttered indefinitely. Social service personnel, along with teachers made sure to obtain all contact information from our family's, as we hadn't a clue concerning our reopening. The social service personnel reached out to families several times a week to ensure that everyone was alright, with emphasis on our family's living in shelters. Right away there were families that were in need; particularly our families living in New York City Shelters. Families needed food right away; we would be called upon to continue providing meals to the children. Head Start programs are in part funded by the USDA (The United States Department of Agriculture) Food and Consumer Services. At Head Start programs, nutritional requirements have to be met, as we are a full day program two thirds of a child's daily nutritional intake comes from the school; with each child's nutritional requirements needing to be adhered to. With the program no longer operating in person, meals had to get to the families.

Our director, on her own, cooked weeks' worth of meals; one week at a time to ensure that our families in need would still receive the food that their children had come to rely on. Teachers voluntarily went into one of our sites that remains open solely for the purpose of an emergency outpost for the families. I was one of those teachers that went in to pack breakfasts and lunches to provide to them. On the day that I went in, I alone packaged seventy-five lunches. Five breakfasts, and five lunches per family; with the

exception of extenuating circumstances such as residing in a shelter, or doubled up families, they received more.

Not only did our program feed the families, we provided materials for the children's continued learning. With deep consideration for the demographic, it was understood that we had to replenish the supplies that had been given at the beginning of the school year. We transitioned from being in class daily, to remote learning and sending care packages almost seamlessly. If families were able to visit the site, appointments were set up so that they could pick up materials needed for our remote lessons, books to read, flashcards, alphabet and number stencils, to name a few; some packages were mailed to the families. What was most important was that we were able to reach every child to ensure healthy transition to remote learning.

I am beyond proud of the undertakings in which my work provides to the countless families that I have been privileged to serve. It is the responsibility of a Head Start to provide the things that are necessary for the children with disadvantageous circumstances. My belief is that at my program, we outperform many, purely because we wholeheartedly care. Furthermore, we bestow valuable information to our family's which are homeless; particulars that one is not automatically given as a homeless family. One such resource is, The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act which is a federal legislative response to homelessness signed by former President Ronald Reagan in (1987). Homelessness hadn't garnered much attention up until the mid-nineteen eighties, as former President Reagan didn't believe that homelessness was a federal issue; but believed it to be more of an issue for localities.

Gaining more attention towards the mid to late nineteen eighties, advocates for the homeless began to demand acknowledgement from the federal government that homelessness was a national problem that required government aid. Preventive measures, relief measures, and long-term solutions were introduced in the Homeless Persons' Survival Act in both houses of Congress in (1986). Of course, this legislation would be amended numerous times until the Homeless Housing Act was assumed in nineteen eighty-six; legislation that would create an Emergency Shelter Grant program, along with a transitional housing demonstration program. These programs were, and continue today to be run by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Sharing such resources with our homeless families is vital, yet grueling; lengthy documents are time consuming. At the Head Start where I teach, the social service personnel have shortened versions of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act to share with our homeless families, being sure that they know and understand their rights, and what they are entitled to as a homeless family. The use of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act requires that the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), use its' definition of homeless, as it applies to children and youth, in 2016. "Understanding the definition will ensure that children who may be experiencing homelessness are identified and given the chance to participate in programs that offer developmental and educational support" (National Center on Child Care Subsidy Innovation and Accountability). This resource is pertinent to homeless families as more times than not, they have not been informed. Currently we have families that do not know that they fit the criteria for homeless. As defined by the McKinney-Vento Homeless Act, "children living in emergency shelters, motels, hotels,

trailer parks, cars, parks, public spaces, or abandoned buildings, and those sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence”, (McKinney-Vento Homeless Act; National Center on Child Care Subsidy Innovation and Accountability, 1987). Being prideful disallows; and rightly so, homeless families are not all the time forthright about their housing situations. By sharing resources that are beneficial to them, trust is gained, a relationship forms, and only then can we supply the family with the support necessary to see them through a trying time. I can recall several times being unaware of a family's situation in total. Becoming aware means that social service personnel have to be cognizant of each family on a day to day basis; teachers also have to remain attuned to the children in her classroom.

There are many subtleties that a homeless child may exhibit in a classroom setting. Changes in behavior are key indicators of homelessness for a preschool child. Hyperactivity, anxiety, conflicts with peers, being headstrong, becoming antisocial, are all but some of the behavioral indicators that a homeless preschooler may present in the classroom. Sleepiness may be the most obvious indicator. Homeless children spend countless hours traveling to and from school; with their caregiver on many occasions having to travel to more than one school since they have more than one child. Sleepiness can also be a result of waiting for placement for the night, if a family is newly homeless. Having to spend hours at an intake center, which is located in the South Bronx, called Prevention Assistance and Temporary Housing, (PATH). PATH is run by the New York City Department of Homeless Services, and described as, “a state-of-the-art and eco-friendly facility that has been specifically sized, staffed, and laid out to meet the demand

for homeless services” (New York City Department of Homeless Services, 2020)”; our families would beg to differ.

Being placed in what they call a cluster site is at times equally as burdensome for homeless families. While it should provide respite from the turmoil of homelessness, it can add to the family’s despair. Cluster sites are mostly unaccommodating to these families, having to double up with other families, having shared kitchens, bathrooms, and living space; also, being notorious for being located in unsavory areas of the city. Cluster sites are buildings that New York City rent spaces at a premium from private landlords. Families aren’t given a choice in placement so most cluster sites are quite a distance from the child's school. Having to wake up before the sunrises, and arriving home long after a child his age should still be awake, is exhausting. I can recall a family that had to travel from Hollis Queens, to our school in Harlem; the mother dropping her youngest child off with us, then having to travel farther for her eldest two, and then to work. The travel time alone was ninety minutes going, and coming. The child that was in our care during the day often fell asleep during our morning meeting, yet he still took a nap at naptime. His mother would explain how she would let him sleep during their commute, only if a kind stranger would relinquish their seat.

There is also a very important factor in homeless children that is often overlooked while a family is being placed; whether a child is receiving services for a cognitive, communication, physical/motor, social/emotional, or adaptive/self-help delay. A family being placed miles from the school that they are already attending could mean the child can no longer attend the school where his need for services are already being met, or he may never receive the evaluation that he desperately needs to assess his situation. With so

many components for the child in need of services to commence; referrals, evaluation, and meetings; having the disparity of being too far from your school is a needless burden to endure. “Students living in a homeless shelter or other temporary housing arrangements have certain rights, including access to the same public education and services that are available to permanently housed students” (A Family Guide to Preschool Special Education Services, NYC Department of Education, 2019); as stated, however not always coming to fruition. Advocates for Children (AFC), is an organization that solely protects a child’s rights to a quality education, with its’ focal point being children that hail from low income families, experiencing discrimination of any kind, or struggling in school.

I can recall a time in the not so distant past where a parent had to reach out to AFC. Her child was enrolled in our Head Start program, just having turned three years old. Notably there was an issue with the child, and the family. During the intake process the child’s mother was on the brink of moving out of the shelter system. She had been placed in the North Bronx, yet given our agency as a place in which to enroll her child. She was drinking from a bottle, sitting in a stroller, wearing a diaper, making no eye contact, and she was non-verbal. She’d never received any early intervention services, as the family had been homeless, and moved around frequently.

Once enrolled, and attending school regularly, we were able to start the process of evaluation. The process was daunting for the mother of two, thankfully she made it through. It was discovered that the child was not in a preschool setting that would foster her development, as she was deemed to be on the autism spectrum. With the entire process assuming over five months, and her prognosis, there was no placement for her.

No school in which to send a child that has been deemed unable to thrive in her current environment. Gleefully, I was at that time attending Bank Street College of Education, where I learned of AFC from an esteemed educator. I, in turn passed the information about this organization on to the social service personnel assigned to my classroom to much avail. It took a bit of nudging to get the child's caregiver to give them a call; she felt uncertain. After gaining her nerve to call AFC, we saw progress, immediately. Within a couple weeks' time, there were two schools that the caregiver could visit to see if they were suitable for her child. Needless to say, AFC, and my esteemed educator were literal lifesavers for this girl who is now thriving at a school for children with autism.

Forming partnerships with various organizations, and trusted professionals is also vital for the Head Start program; these partnerships can in turn provide homeless families with services that are free of cost. Offering transparency, and empathy while a family is suffering through homelessness can, at times be all a family may require. On site we have a Mental Health Specialist who works tenaciously with staff, and families alike to ensure that we can unburden ourselves of taxing affairs that affect us emotionally. The site's doctor is readily available for meetings with families, and to offer resources pertaining to their needs. He also makes himself available to the children; he allows them to talk about their frustrations, and worries as well. Being homeless takes a toll on one's psyche; having available a doctor, trained to accommodate heavy discussions is advantageous.

Taking care of one's emotional needs is as important as tending to the physical health of the homeless preschooler. Just like living in a shelter can cause belongings, or schools to be left behind; so can the families health provider be left behind. When physicals, or dental assessments are in need; the Head Start where I work has partnerships with a

health center that is within walking distance, so the child may receive their annual physical, or get their much-needed prescriptions filled. If the need for medical insurance is the barrier keeping the family from receiving care; there are social workers within the health care center to assist. We also have a partnership with dental services. They come to us a couple of times throughout the year to service the children at our head start, which is especially beneficial for a homeless family as taking their child to an office could be time consuming, and a monetary burden on account of travel expenses.

Literature Review

Homelessness of a preschooler is a topic that is not debatable, yet it's factual and intense in its theories as to its causes and effects. Homeless preschoolers suffer tremendously despite the relentless efforts of their caregivers, facing an astounding array of obstacles that far exceed the lack of a stable home to live in. Homelessness can be a disease that can hinder the ability to thrive; leaving him stagnant in his efforts in reaching his full potential.

“Research shows that brain development in early childhood lays the foundation for all future learning, behavior and health (Center on the Developing Child, n.d.) This is when children develop the cognitive and social-emotional skills needed to successfully navigate challenges they will encounter the rest of their lives (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2000). Brain development in the earliest years can be affected by homelessness, which can in turn negatively affect educational outcomes. Linking homelessness to marked delays in social-emotional development, engagement, academic accomplishment, and emergent social skills, as they enter elementary school. “With approximately half of all children who stay in federally funded emergency and

transitional housing programs being five or younger (Perlman, Fantuzzo, 2010), it is imperative to address the challenges of young children experiencing homelessness”).

Priority must be given to young children that reside in homeless shelters, and enrolling them into quality programs that support their development and learning; moderating some of the unfavorable influences of homelessness; lessening the performance gap, and placing the child in a position for school readiness and success. The U.S Department of education reports that a mere 8% of homeless preschoolers are attending Head Start programs, or programs affiliated with McKinney-Vento programs. The reoccurring reason for the lack of participation in such programs are the number of slots available, and the lack of arranged transportation. The Every Students Succeeds Act (ESSA), 2015, requires that every homeless child can remain in his home preschool, being provided with transportation in the event that the family moves. Mayor de Balsio stated, “we’ve been providing in shelter additional counseling, additional academic support; we’ve been providing, obviously, bus service for kids in shelters to get them to their schools and trying to move the families closer to the schools in their home communities”. In 2017 over 1 million children were served by Head Starts nationally, with more than 52,000 of those children being reported as homeless, (Institute for Children, Poverty & Homelessness, 2020).

The Coalition for the Homeless, an organization which provides many services to the homeless such as, food assistance, youth services, advocacy, and housing; stated that the situation of homelessness has reached levels of which haven’t been seen since the Great Depression of the 1930’s. Just this past April there were 60, 422 homeless people recorded, with 13, 861 homeless families, of which 20, 494 are homeless children.

Throughout the city's 2019 budgetary year 132, 660 women, men, and children would sleep in the New York City shelter system; including 44, 300 different homeless New York City children. In 2015 there was a small amount of shared zip codes which turned out the majority of homeless families. Today homeless families come from every zip code in New York City, prior to entering the shelter system. With the number of New Yorkers sleeping in shelters about 61% higher than what was recorded ten years ago. The unsheltered homeless are immeasurable, as they may spend nights in cars, or public transportation (The Coalition for the Homeless, 2020).

Lack of affordable housing appears to be the principal reason for homelessness today. Surveying families that are homeless; lists some of the identifying factors of homelessness as, doubling up with other families/overcrowding, domestic violence, eviction, dangerous living conditions, and the loss of a job. Poverty is also a contributing factor to homelessness, with Black, Hispanic/Latinx New Yorkers disproportionately being affected. In shelters, as of April 2020, more than 55% heads of households are Black, Hispanic/Latinx represent over 30%, with 7% being white, Asians representing less than 1%, and 3% being of unknown ethnicity/race (Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, 2020).

With limited resources and little to no growth in wages; the continual rise in rent puts an extra stronghold on an already struggling family. New York is the home to over 8 million people, 1 in 125 are homeless. 60% of New Yorkers report that they do not have a recommended 3 months' worth of emergency funds for rent and food in the event that they will need it. With close to 20% of New York City's population living below the poverty line; that's roughly 1, 600,000 people. Living below the poverty line affects 1 in

3 children, with a family of four earning about \$24, 300. Tending to be clustered in neighborhoods where there are high rates of, substance abuse, violence, unemployment, and teenage pregnancies. “All of this can have negative effects on child development and well-being, and ultimately perpetuate cycles of poverty and inequality” (The Bowery Mission, 2020).

With 1 in 3 families paying more than half of their salary in rent, (they are referred to as rent burdened), these families are more than half the time more likely to enter into the city’s homeless system. A rent burdened family has to make difficult choices without receiving assistance; in having to choose to either pay the majority of their salary towards rent; leaving barely enough funds to put food on the table, or to pay for other necessities. Quite often these families go hungry, while struggling to remain connected with the workforce. The lack of economic security has been deemed to negatively impact homeless families’ well-being in the short, and long term.

Suffering from concentrated poverty are two neighborhoods that border one another, East Harlem or Spanish Harlem/El Barrio, and the South Bronx. East Harlem, in 2018, was the home to approximately 110, 800 people. With roughly 46.5% being identified as Hispanic, 27.3% as Black, 7.4% Asian, and 16.1 identified as white. The South Bronx, which is more densely populated than New York City itself was the home to 57.1% Hispanics, 39.8% Blacks, 1.4% whites, and 0.5% Asians; with the remaining percentages belonging to mixed race/other (Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness, 2020). These neighborhoods are troubled with higher rates of crime, poor housing conditions, and poor health conditions; the welfare of the children living in these areas is at risk.

Not only are children and families from the two aforementioned neighborhoods being affected tremendously by homelessness, or impending homelessness; more than 140,000 children in New York City have experienced homelessness. These children have a most difficult time maintaining attendance, academic success, having access to resources that support their educational and emotional needs, as well as having a place to sleep.

“Improving student achievement for homeless and formerly homeless students is not as simple as addressing a student’s housing, but knowing more about homeless students’ experiences in school is an important step to addressing their unique support needs (Institute for Children Poverty and Homelessness, 2020)”.

With homelessness in students being prevalent throughout New York City, The Atlas of Student Homelessness, 2017, conducted an in-depth analysis of student homelessness across its’ five boroughs. Following a cohort over the course of six years; it was recorded that homelessness in children jumped nearly 50%. Moving forward, at this current trend; it is stated that one in seven students will experience homelessness. With homelessness persisting, children that are living in shelters are about half as likely to be proficient in their state exams. Chronic absenteeism, and mid-year transfers to different schools are contributing factors to homeless students inability to stay on par with their peers.

Preschoolers in need of special services are not being reached nearly as much as their counterparts who have permanent addresses. A project director for Early Childhood Education Project at Advocates for children, Betty Baez Melo said, “integrating preschool-aged students into early childhood education, even if special education services weren’t necessarily available, was a good first step, and the biggest vulnerability

remained with children in the shelter system who did not attend preschool at all.” The Institute for Children, Poverty, and Homelessness states, “of 20,000 homeless three and four-year olds in New York, more than 4,000 students who could benefit from special education, were not being reached.”

Conclusion

Most would agree that homelessness is a tremendous problem in New York City. Affecting the most vulnerable of our city’s population, children and their families. Arguably, some may not consider it a problem for the masses; just a personal issue that should be dealt with in silence. Teachers, and schools however are thrust into the forefront of the problems that encompass being homeless; as we are amongst the first caregivers that a preschool student may have. Acknowledging that we can be an integral part of the homeless preschoolers’ growth, both educationally and emotionally are beneficial for his well-being. In establishing a trusted relationship with these families, especially the child, we could ease the pressure of day to day challenges they may face in being homeless.

As teachers dutifully prepare their classrooms each year for new students; we must empathically prepare for homeless children that in need of something to call their own. I long for every teacher to obtain diversions to give these children, as they may need more than just a permanent address. The simple joys that homeless children are most often unable to partake in are overlooked by many. A plant to water daily, a class pet to care of, or merely small trinkets; such as, a plush toy, a ball, baby doll; anything to allow for a feeling of wholeness, something to call their own. Knowing that the instability of moving from place to place, monthly, weekly, or even worse, nightly, can break the spirit of an

adult. Could you begin to fathom the feelings of a child experiencing homelessness, so new to the world; innocent; yet with a burden so unimaginable to some adults? We have to be accountable for his education; yet we need to be even more attuned to his social and emotional security; being amenable to his psychological cues.

Take notice of the confidence in which these children have for you as their teacher, the sense of belonging and familiarity that they have as they enter your classroom each day. We are setting the foundation for a homeless child's realization of stability. If knowing that all the stability they have in their lives is their family, classroom, peers, and their teacher; recognize that you are a part of a foundation that will set the stage for life. In recognizing this, we can be cognizant of the valuable impact that we are making for this child's future.

References

Advocates for Children of New York; NYC's Homeless Student Population Reaches a New Disturbing High, Keierleber M., 2016.

American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau; Homeless Outreach Population Estimate (HOPE), April, 2018.

City Limits, NYC Has a Family Homelessness Crisis; Who Are the Families?; Brand D.; December 10, 2019.

Coalition for the Homeless; New York City Homelessness: The Basic Facts, April, 2020.

Family Homelessness Coalition; Family Homelessness Fact Sheet, February, 2020.

Institute for Children Poverty & Homelessness; About Student Homelessness, April, 2020.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act; Reauthorized, December, 2015.

National Center for Homeless Education Brief Series; Early Care and Education for Young Children Experiencing Homelessness; Moore J., 2018

National Center on Parent Family and Community Engagement; Early Childhood Centers, 2020.

New York City Department of Homeless Services; Families with Children, 2020.

New York City Department of Homeless Services; Poverty in New York, 2020.

Shelter Census Reports; New York City, 2019

The Bowery Mission; Homelessness is a Shared Experience in the New York Metro Area, 2020.

United States Department of Education, 2020.

United States Department of Education's Student Achievement and School
Accountability Programs, 2020.