Applying Equity Literacy's Four Abilities to Middle Schools for the Benefit of Students Experiencing Homelessness

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Abstract

In this essay, I use the McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 to define homelessness and describe its prevalence in United States public schools. I present readers with statistics about student homelessness and situate Gorski's equity literacy within the progressive, equity-oriented foundations of the middle school movement and as a means by which stakeholders could begin to address homelessness in their contexts. After presenting the four abilities of equity literate educators, I apply the abilities to the nuances of student homelessness in the middle grades.

Introduction

Student homelessness is present in middle schools across the country whether teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders acknowledge it or not. The National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE] (2020) documented that during the 2017-2018 school year, U.S. public schools enrolled more than 1.5 million students who meet the federal definition of homelessness. Some researchers believe that those numbers would more than double if every student who qualified as homeless under the federal government's definition were to come forward to receive services (Bassuk et al., 2014; Hallett, Low, & Skrla, 2015). Bustamante (2019) documented the total number of teachers as 3.1 million. If the true population of students experiencing homelessness is more than double the reported numbers, that would amount to a ratio of nearly 1 student experiencing homelessness for every public school teacher. The middle grades, defined here as grades five through nine, enrolled 537,859 students who meet the federal definition of homelessness during the 2017-2018 school year (NCHE, 2020). These numbers represent more than one-third of the document instances of student homelessness and an average increase of more than 17% since the 2015-2016 school year.

Experiences of homelessness are marked with transience. One young adolescent experiencing homelessness had already attended seven different schools by the time he was in the 5th grade (Moulton, 2018). Machella, currently an undergraduate student, recounted how she moved 22 different times before the eighth-grade (National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, 2016). Constant mobility results in instability in friend groups, relationships with teachers, and academic experiences. Additionally, the transience between nighttime residences for students experiencing homelessness could lead to transportation issues, unnecessary absences, and lack of consistent meals (Moulton, 2019). Studies not directly related to the middle grades found that youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to develop disorders with relation to body weight (Fournier et al., 2009); express a negative attitude about school (Kennedy, 2007); demonstrate behavior problems in school settings (Fowler et al., 2009); have parents who are perceived as non-supportive (Nott & Vuchinich, 2016); and, if they had experiences in the foster care system, more likely to trade sex for money or drugs (Hudson & Nandy, 2012).

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2001 (MV) defines *homeless* as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence" (2015, Sec. 725). This includes students who

- share the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason;
- live in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations;
- live in emergency or transitional shelters; are abandoned in hospitals; or are awaiting foster care placement;
- 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
- live in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
- are migratory children who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described above. (MV, 2015, Sec. 725)

Teacher education programs do little if anything to prepare teacher candidates to work with and for students experiencing homelessness (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008, 2011). Calabrese Barton (2000) detailed her experiences with incorporating service-learning as a means of developing empathic understandings of homelessness and poverty though the focus was not necessarily on preparing teacher candidates on the MV and who qualifies for services related to homelessness. Powers-Costello and Swick (2008) suggest that teacher educators help teacher candidates "develop an awareness of the challenges and situations experienced by homeless children and families" (p. 243) through service-learning, action research, and mentoring/tutoring relationships but does not provide statistics on programs who employ such opportunities.

In a qualitative study of teacher's preparedness to support students experiencing homelessness, Tobin et al. (2018) found that most teachers had no formal training with respect to supporting students experiencing homelessness in their teacher preparation program. Of the 156 teachers from a school district with more than 5% of its enrolled students meeting federal definitions of homelessness who took the survey, 90 did not record any answers when asked how many students experiencing homelessness were enrolled in their school. The lack of understanding who qualifies for services, and how many students experiencing homelessness are enrolled in our classrooms, is not uncommon (Hallett, Low, & Skrla, 2015; Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015; Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008, 2011).

The ignorance extends to middle grades classrooms and research. In a qualitative content analysis of middle level education research publishing sources, Brinegar (2015) found:

A dearth of published research in areas that are critical to developing systems and practices meant to support the needs of every young adolescent, including specific populations (e.g., males, African Americans, students with disabilities); diversity (e.g., broad topics related to equity, discrimination, social justice, multicultural education); motivation and engagement; student voice; leadership; and family/community connections. (p. 1)

Brinegar (2015) continued by stating that despite 22% of the U.S. population experiencing poverty, only 7 of the 691 articles and book chapters analyzed in the content analysis addressed the experiences and needs of students experiencing poverty, let alone homelessness. Middle grades research, specifically research published in the main middle grades texts, must pursue, borrowing from *This We Believe* (National Middle School Association, 2010), more empowering and equitable research.

Addressing this lack of representation, Brinegar et al. (2019) co-edited the first handbook volume explicitly focused on issues of equity and cultural responsiveness for the Handbook of Research in Middle Level Education series. One chapter of the text focused on the lived experiences of one young adolescent experiencing homelessness who chose the pseudonym Kyrie (Moulton, 2019). Using participant created maps, the study documented how Kyrie's middle school met his needs. Results illuminated how the student's school supported positive relationships with caring adults while at the same time not meeting some vital needs like access to consistent and reliable food. In a similar study which also employed arts-based methods, Moulton (2018) worked with a young adolescent who chose the pseudonym AJ. At the time of the study AJ resided in a homeless shelter with his mother and four younger siblings. AJ created identity artifacts (Esteban-Guitart, 2016)–products created by individuals to share aspects of their identities–including a significant circle and a map of his school. Resulting conversations revealed how AJ's identity was so much more than the label of "homeless." AJ enjoyed creating art and music, he used his Wi-Fi enabled phone to record videos and post to Instagram and YouTube, and he kept in touch with his friends and family using social media and chat/phone call apps that did not require a cellular connection. AJ was/is resourceful and his identities are multifaceted.

Research in middle grades outlets and other venues that relate directly to homelessness and young adolescents is slim. But, the progressive ideals of the middle school movement (Smith & McEwin, 2011) still promote middle grades education as a vehicle for social change. For example, the Middle Level Curriculum Project (1993) wrote:

> ...[M]iddle level educational practices should demonstrate the value of human diversity, wherein all members of the school community are treated with equity, justice, dignity, and respect. Oppression has no place in schools or society. Race, gender, sexual orientation, class, creed, language, nationalism, regionalism, ability, or age must not restrict access to the richest and fullest experiences within the school community. (p. 108)

I propose employing Gorski's (2013) equity literacy as a means of combating the lack of understanding related to students experiencing homelessness within middle grades schools while pursuing the Middle Level Curriculum Project's progressive ideals.

Through equity literacy, Gorski (2013) implores readers to expand their view of poverty from a micro-location residing with(in) individuals to a larger, systems view within which everyone is actively and passively participating. Gorski and Swalwell (2015) describe equity literacy as a framework:

> For both multicultural curriculum development and bigger efforts to create equitable classrooms and schools...Its central tenet is that any meaningful approach to diversity or multiculturalism relies more on teachers' understandings of equity and inequity and of justice and injustice than on their understanding of this or that culture. (p. 36)

This framework applies to issues related to social class and specifically homelessness in the way we prepare our teachers to address the issues of homelessness in schools. What follows is a prescription that schools could use to apply equity literacy for the benefit of their students experiencing homelessness and the entirety of their student population.

Equity Literacy's Four Abilities and Applications with Student Homelessness

The aim of equity literacy is to "place *equity,* rather than *culture,* at the center of the diversity conversation" (Gorski & Swalwell, 2015, p. 36). Doing so requires stakeholders to cultivate four abilities of equity literate educators. The four abilities are recognizing, responding, redressing, and cultivating and sustaining.

Recognizing

The first ability of equity literacy tasks educators with *recognizing* biases and inequities as they exist in our schools and communities. Gorski (2013) describes the need to recognize both the subtle and not-so-subtle inequities that impact students and communities on a daily basis. Doing so requires educators to identify their personal cultural and historical experiences while simultaneously making explicit how those experiences impact ways of knowing and being in school spaces (hooks, 1994; Hughes et al., 2016; Jones, 2006).

Ask Yourself

How do I define homelessness and identify who experiences it? Consider the pictures obtained through a Google image search with the only search terms "student homelessness" (see Figure 1). While reviewing, ask yourself *What am I looking at? Who is in these pictures?* And ultimately, *What do these pictures tell me about societal definitions of student homelessness in the United States?*

Figure 1

Student Homelessness Google Image Search
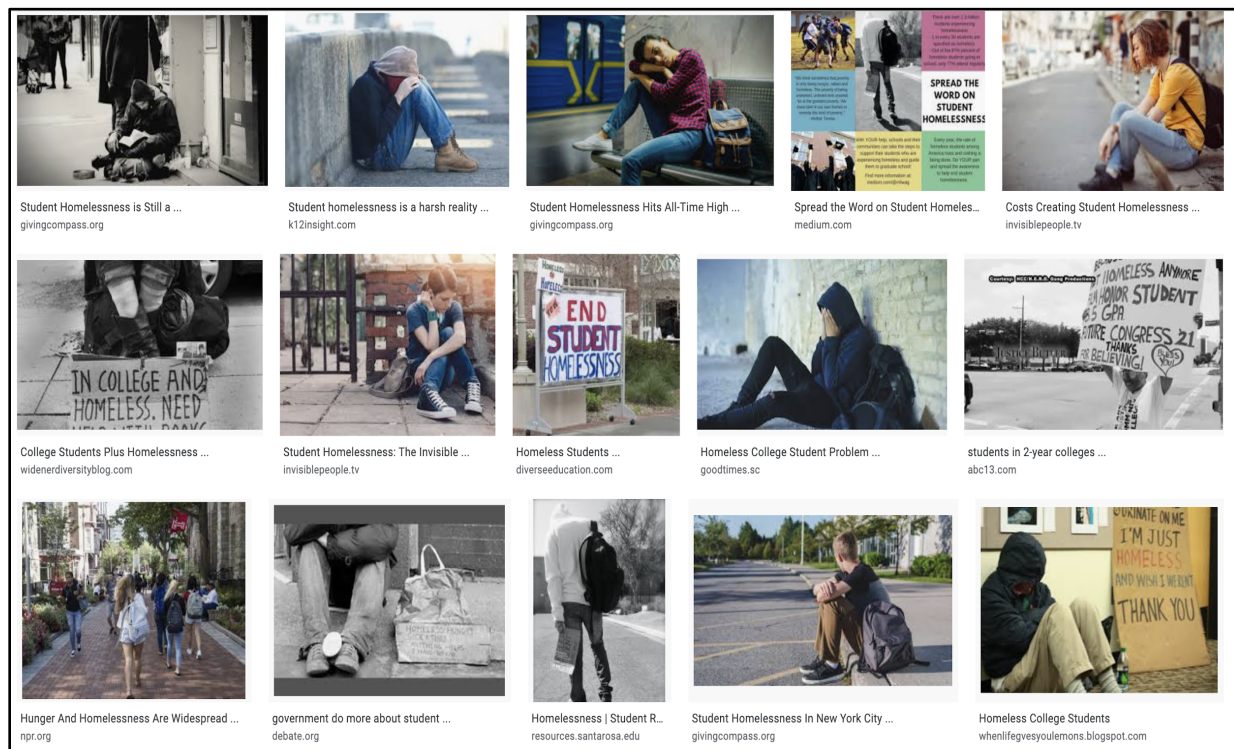
While reviewing these pictures with teacher candidates, one of the first things that grabbed our attention was how alone each person is in the pictures. Secondly, teacher candidates used words like shame and despair to describe the pictures, similar to Kim's (2013) findings with early childhood teacher candidates. Teacher candidates also mentioned the abundance of cardboard signs. Search engines build their algorithms using data gathered from every search that takes place, the words surrounding an image, and aspects of the image itself (Google, n.d.). If Google image searches learn more about society with every search, it could be inferred that the top results of a Google image search are an adequate representation of what society believes about a search term.

Stakeholders must ask themselves how they define homelessness. They must make explicit their beliefs and then weigh them against reality. If their personal definitions do not align with federal government definitions of homelessness, they must then ask how to negotiate the differences. If a student qualifies for services but does not align with a teacher's antiquated view of homelessness, their specific needs could be ignored.

Responding

The second ability insists that educators *respond* to the biases and inequities present in schools, communities, and personal practices "in the immediate term, as they crop up in classrooms and schools" (Gorski, 2013, p. 21). Brene Brown (2012) describes common practices that individuals use to combat the discomfort of vulnerability. Responding to personal biases and inequities will require vulnerability and educators to acknowledge their own biases and prejudices as they crop up in classrooms. Brown (2012) describes the practice of *appreciating the beauty of cracks* as a means of combating perfectionism. When educators present themselves as perfectionists, infallible, and unimpacted by bias, prejudice, and inequity, we allow the bias, prejudice, and inequity to take root and flourish in our classrooms, schools, communities, and our lives.

Ask Yourself

How can we respond to issues of student homelessness through positive relationships with students? Doda (2013) described the academic perils that present themselves when positive relationships are absent from school spaces. This means that stakeholders must learn about their students' lives, identities, and interests outside of school. It means that we isolate the homelessness identity; recognize, respond to, and redress it; while treating it as a solitary condition and not an all-consuming determinant of a student's identity and personality. AJ, from Moulton (2018), only discussed his living situation with two teachers at his school. The relationships they shared were consistent, reliable, and safe. AJ was not outed to his friends as someone experiencing homelessness. When I asked him about one of his teachers, AJ shared, "Do I think she would tell my friends? No" (Moulton, 2018). AJ did not want his friends to know about his living situation and he trusted his teacher not to share it. Trust was developed over time. Transient relationships slow down or even halt the formation of trust.

Ask Yourself

How do we respond to issues of inequity with respect to the needs of students experiencing homelessness? How have they changed over time, and why? Consider for example, what happens if a student is unable to pay for and participate in a field trip? An equity literate practice might seek alternative funding for the field trip so no students need to raise funds. Field trips are vital opportunities to enrich learning outside the four walls of a classroom. Perhaps there are sponsoring agencies that could sponsor field trips. Another alternative could include a discretionary fund at the school or district level that stakeholders could utilize in the event of an inequity that impacts a student's access to the same, challenging, equitable, education of their peers.

Redressing.

Gorski's third ability challenges educators to *redress* "biases and inequities in the longer term, so that they do not continue to crop up in classrooms and schools" (2013, p. 21). The act of redressing makes things right. It addresses the cause of an issue in a proactive way so that

further injustice will not befall individuals or communities impacted by the injustice.

Ask Yourself

What makes our context (school, district, community) equitable or inequitable with respect to young adolescents experiencing homelessness? What sort of policies are in place that may adversely impact students experiencing homelessness? For example, what is the school/district policy on attendance or tardiness? What happens if a student is late for school and misses their only opportunity for breakfast? Kyrie, introduced earlier in reference to Moulton (2019), would occasionally miss the school bus and then need to find his own way to school, resulting in tardiness and missing out on breakfast. What sort of policies are in place related to food drives, fundraisers, and dress codes? If a student is unable to participate in a food drive or fundraiser, will they be at an academic disadvantage? If a student does not have access to clean clothes as dictated by the dress code, will they be removed from the classroom environment? It is against the MV (2015) to separate a child from their classmates simply because they experience homelessness, but how do stakeholders navigate these waters? Though these issues are not directly related to homelessness, they are definitely tangential at the least.

Cultivating and Sustaining

Lastly, or rather enduringly, Gorski (2013) calls for educators to "create and sustain a bias-free and equitable learning environment for all students" (p. 21). This necessitates continual reflection on personal practice and an acknowledgement of how systemic policy impacts the perpetuation of bias and injustice.

Ask Yourself

How can we better prepare ourselves to proactively meet the needs of our students experiencing homelessness? This means that schools, districts, and communities should have regular training on student homelessness, the MV, and equitable practices that build advocacy and relationship. Stakeholders should look for opportunities to educate folks on who qualifies for services under federal legislation. This could include engaging with local media organizations through writing op-eds for newspapers or working with local television stations to

spotlight student homelessness. In a less-visible way, advocates could create infographics that direct individuals towards services available to them and place them in public places like libraries and coffee shops.

Conclusion

Research tells us that youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to disengage from academics and eventually drop out of school (Biggar, 2001). Dominant narratives depict those experiencing homelessness as aloof, alone, and unengaged (Kim, 2013). A team of stakeholders who actively employ equity literate practices can confront and subvert those trends and dominant narratives. Starting with school wide education about homelessness will begin the process of *recognition*. Once school staff, faculty, and administrators are better able to recognize the inequities present within school walls, they can begin the process of *responding* purposefully. *Redressing* the injustices of inequitable policies and practices is a logical and necessary next step. All throughout the process, stakeholders must be reflective of their practices ensuring that equitable practices are *cultivated and sustained*. Equity literacy, and engaged stakeholders who are ready and willing to fully engage with its charges, points towards a hope for not just students experiencing homelessness but also for the schools they are enrolled in, their fellow students, and the communities within which they live.

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