**Reforming the engagement of schools with unaccompanied homeless children**

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**Summary**

Homelessness, with poverty and housing inaccessibility as its underlying structural drivers, has an enduring presence in all Western nations. Whilst governments traditionally focus on supporting adults, families, and youth out of homelessness, increasingly attention is being turned to the significant number of children under 18 years who experience homelessness alone without an accompanying parent or guardian. Unaccompanied children commonly leave home early against the backdrop of family conflict and breakdown, domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse, and neglect. They may sleep rough without shelter, couch surf between extended family members, friends, and acquaintances, and access those youth refuges which will accommodate them. Without access to the consistent care of a parent or guardian, unaccompanied homeless children experience unique personal, systemic, and structural vulnerabilities which, without adequate developmentally appropriate intervention, will result in a range of physical, psychological, social, and educational harms.

Schools, as the sole universal statutory service for children, can be central in the immediate safeguarding of children and their referral to services for additional supports. Schools can also offer a pathway into life-long learning, employment, and community connectedness that is crucial to reducing poverty and enabling wellbeing and social inclusion. As such, schools have a key role to play in responding to unaccompanied homeless children by ensuring equitable access to education and engaging with the international shift towards child and youth homelessness prevention and early intervention.

Research consistently suggests school-based programs are key to identifying children at risk, to preventing homelessness, and improving learning outcomes for those who do experience homelessness. At minimum, schools can intervene in educational harms, such as low attainment and early school leaving, which are associated with high mobility, a lack of support, cumulative trauma, and stigma. Addressing administrative and practical barriers to homeless children’s school access and attendance, implementing trauma-informed practice and increasing awareness of homelessness are essential starting points. Further, the trend of articulating child wellbeing as a shared, cross-sector goal has increasingly created opportunities for schools, in collaboration with social services, to become innovative homelessness prevention and early intervention hubs which strengthen children’s outcomes.

**Key words**: unaccompanied homeless children, trauma, educational harm, prevention, cross-sector collaboration, Australia

**Introduction: Connecting school reform and homelessness**

Homelessness is a prominent yet solvable problem for communities and policy-makers around the world. Whilst the scale of and approach to homelessness differs between nations, addressing poverty and housing supply and affordability are the foundational principles for preventing and resolving homelessness (Parsell & Marston, 2012). The prevention of child and youth homelessness similarly rests on family access to sufficient income and safe, affordable housing. When families experience reduced stress and increased wellbeing, the key issues broadly understood to trigger child and youth homelessness – family conflict and breakdown, abuse, and neglect – are less likely to emerge. In addition, strong investment in family and parenting supports is key to the prevention and resolution of child and youth homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2018; Schwan et al., 2018).

While a focus on prevention makes common sense in the overlapping fields of homelessness and child welfare, ‘making the shift’ (Gaetz et al., 2018, p. 4) is only recently emerging as an explicit theme in research, advocacy, practice, and policy development, and especially in the culture and politics of human services delivery where primary or structural prevention is cast as slow and expensive (Parsell & Marston, 2012, p. 37). Managing populations already experiencing risk is still a significant focus of both youth homelessness and child welfare policy and practice, through the internationally common practices of providing temporary shelters and transitional housing and forcibly separating at-risk children from their birth families, despite evidence of the human and financial costs of such approaches (see for example Broadhurst & Mason, 2017; MacKenzie et al., 2016).

One key effect of this risk management approach is that as populations continue to experience risk and harm, the tertiary services attempting to address this become overwhelmed and unable to respond. Further, a lack of political interest in the structural prevention of social problems over recent decades has resulted in a widely observed reduction in welfare infrastructure, in particular public housing (see for example Lawson et al., 2018). This infrastructure reduction contributes to increased risk and harm and communities can arrive at a crisis point where nothing short of profound political and practical intervention can short-circuit an exponential need for support. As such, housing crises and homelessness, including unaccompanied child homelessness, remain a paradoxically persistent feature of wealthy civil societies, despite their commitment to international charters of human and child rights.

It is against this backdrop that a renewed push towards prevention and early intervention solutions to homelessness and child welfare issues can be seen in the work of research and advocacy organisations internationally, for example the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (Gaetz & Dej, 2017) and the Centre for the Study of Social Policy (https://cssp.org/our-work/project/upend/). Central to such reform agendas is the understanding that whilst risk management of housing unaffordability and poverty involves siloed government agencies and specialised community services, the prevention and early identification of homelessness and child abuse and neglect requires cross-agency and cross-sector collaboration.

It is at this point that the turn to education systems and the potential for school reform becomes significant in contemporary policy and practice. This is not because government agencies or community service organisations are now looking to the education system to solve problems that have not proved solvable elsewhere – such as in the housing or child protection systems – but because of a growing recognition of shared goals and responsibility and the benefit of collaborative efforts towards these goals.

As such, the interest in reforming school engagement with unaccompanied homeless children can be seen as an important example of the broader shift towards preventative and early intervention approaches that can positively impact on issues such as early childhood trauma, homelessness, and school disengagement. As Pavlakis and Duffield (2017, p. 817) note, it also reflects the new role of schools in responding to *student* homelessness (see also Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006). This stems from changed understandings of who experiences homelessness, what the impacts of homelessness are, and who should be involved and held accountable for responding. Further, the demand for school reform can also be understood as an outcome of the mounting cross-sector challenge to outdated modes of welfare practice, a challenge rooted in increased awareness that in the face of thinly provided public infrastructure innovation will be required both within and between government and community services.

**Unaccompanied child homelessness**

Though there may be slight variations in legislation internationally, under Article 1 of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, humans under the age of 18 are considered children (https://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/crc.aspx). Unless court orders have been made to transfer care to another party (including the State), parents retain legal responsibility for care of children regardless of whether or not children are consistently in their physical custody. Children under the legal responsibility of parents, other persons, or the State can all experience unaccompanied homelessness if they are not physically accompanied by a parent, carer, or guardian and lack access to adequate, safe, stable accommodation.

The less publicly and administratively visible experiences of children who are *not* subject to care and protection orders are the focus of this chapter. Whilst research comprehensively demonstrates the significance of childhood trauma, neglect, abandonment, and adolescent re-victimisation in pathways into and through child and youth homelessness (Bender et al., 2014; Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; Thompson, 2005; Tyler & Schmitz, 2018), unaccompanied homeless children face the additional barrier of being without the care and advocacy of a guardian and without child protection orders which mandate care, health, and education supports. Further, their developmentally specific needs fall outside the remit of housing and homelessness systems oriented to youth, families, and adults. As there is not a key government agency clearly accountable for their well-being, this group of highly vulnerable children can experience a ‘culture of referral’ where they are passed between numerous services and government agencies, none of which are specifically tasked or resourced to appropriately respond to their needs (Robinson 2017a, p. 86).

**Trauma, homelessness and schoollessness**

In Australia, a recent cluster of research has begun to more concretely articulate the very specific policy, service, and practice needs of unaccompanied homeless children, particularly those under 16 years old (Barry, 2018; Cooper, 2018; Chowdry et al., 2018; Noble-Carr & Trew, 2018; New South Wales Ombudsman, 2018; Robinson, 2017b, 2018 & 2020). This work provides significant insight into children’s trajectories into early home and school leaving and the ongoing impacts of their lack of physical guardianship on their access to care, health, and education services. It firmly situates trauma, school disengagement, and unaccompanied child homelessness as a key problem for innovative school reform to tackle.

By featuring the voices of children in brief retrospective reflections on their difficult trajectories into early home and school leaving, this section aims to give deeper illustration to the connections between trauma, homelessness, and school. Examining the biographies of children who experience homelessness alone not only reveals the early impacts of trauma on their school experiences but also the co-incidence of increasing and prolonged home and school absences.

Robinson’s (2017a) work, undertaken in the southern Australian state of Tasmania, uniquely captures children’s (aged 14-17) life stories which reflect commonly documented themes of the childhood adversity that precedes experiences of unaccompanied homelessness. These are childhoods dominated by poverty, exposure to domestic and community violence, abuse, family conflict, neglect, and abandonment. Whether or not they reported experiencing violence and abuse, all children described profound experiences of feeling abandoned by caregivers. In some instances this related to parents’ incarceration, their decision to leave children when making moves to other partners or places, or their incapacity due to physical and mental illness or drug and alcohol use. In some cases children themselves took on a protective and parenting role in their extended family, providing care and support for mothers and siblings surviving domestic violence and for younger siblings, parents, and grandparents who were ill, frail, or otherwise in need of intimate care-giving.

In this work Robinson (2017a, p. 66) describes the emergence of co-occurring experiences of ‘schoollessness’ and homelessness in children’s lives. Her research shows that for some children, both home *and* mainstream school – the key environments normally expected to enable children to flourish – are dramatically impacted by the effects of early childhood trauma. Further, both home and school are frequently characterised by children in the study as unsafe and as places they get ‘kicked out of’.

The life story excerpts from Kayla, Paul, and Maya below include reflections on childhood trauma and school life. They discuss school engagement, behavioural issues, and bullying as emerging early in primary school; such experiences can be seen to be tightly linked with experiences of abuse and neglect at home. Running away and extended experiences of unaccompanied homelessness, commonly beginning during transition to high school, only add further challenges to their already unstable connections with school.

For Kayla (aged 14), physical abuse from her mother and step-father started early and eventually lead to running away and homelessness, including sleeping rough:

*Catherine: Was he (step-father) hurting you?*

*Kayla: They haven’t been there for me since I was two…Mum always chooses my step-dad’s side over mine. She doesn’t want to lose [step-father] but she doesn’t really care that he hits me, yells at me… I was really scared…so I used to lock myself in the bathroom and jump out the bathroom window and go sleep in people’s backyards. And I remember I went up to town and I was sleeping in an abandoned building for about a month. Mum was trying to get me to go back but I didn’t want to go back unless she promised not to hit me…I had a cold and I always had headaches and I was vomiting and stuff because it’s really dirty in there, it’s got dirt everywhere and I’m living on the ground and stuff. It wasn’t that good…*

Kayla’s description of her schooling captured a chaotic trajectory of bullying, suspension, expulsion, and disrupted learning during primary school, including the use of e-school – online and distance learning – which is normally for students in remote locations. This was followed again by disrupted high school learning and subsequent expulsion. Kayla also makes reference to being ‘really sick’ and missing half a year of schooling. This was related to her hospitalisation following the period of sleeping rough in an abandoned building she describes above:

*Kayla: I started getting suspended in Grade Two, which – I always used to get in trouble because this girl…she used to bully me. I’d always run to my older sister and she didn’t do anything because she didn’t want to get into trouble. So I got bashed in primary school. And I got kicked out in Grade Five because me teacher had [inaudible] holding my hands behind my back in front of the whole class when I was really angry. And like everyone was laughing at me so I got really angry, so I got kicked out. I was allowed back in Grade Six. Had to do e-school in Grade Six sometimes and then I went to Grade Seven and only done half a year because I was really sick...And then I’m in Grade Eight now and I got kicked out of [name of high school]…*

No longer able to live at home because of his violent behavior towards his mother, over a number of years Paul (aged 16) moved between his grandmother and family friends. Paul’s school trajectory was very similar to Kayla’s, which in hindsight he linked to his ongoing experience of physical abuse inflicted by his father and to the evolution of his own violent behavior both at home and at school:

*Catherine: Do you have any memories of what going to primary school was like?*

*Paul: Yeah, I do, yep. Kinder was pretty normal and that and then grade, like Prep and Kinder was normal and Grade One I started getting in a bit of trouble.*

*Catherine: Did you?*

*Paul: Yeah, just being, couldn’t sit still and too rowdy and that in the classroom. And that would continue to about Grade Six, the rest of primary school. So I got into a bit of trouble as well at school.*

*Catherine: And what was going on at that time for you do you think?*

*Paul: Just with my dad and violence towards me and my other siblings. And that – I reckon it’s that which caused – it’s like I grew up with that, I thought it was like the right thing to do I guess.*

In his first year of high school, following a period of suspensions, Paul was forced to find another school after being ‘pretty much expelled’. He interpreted his suspensions from school as an ultimately successful attempt to get him ‘out of the way’:

*Paul: I was just getting into too much trouble and just didn’t go in the end…I would get suspended and that for a couple of days, ten days at time and then I just wouldn’t go back to school…So the school had pretty much expelled me, so I had to find another school…It’s like I guess they thought I was too much trouble, so they would just pretty much suspend, get me out of the way, yeah.*

Whilst most children participating in the research could not recall or did not discuss direct contact with child protection services, Maya (aged 15) described experiencing physical abuse from her mother and was aware that this was being noticed at school and reported – although that made things worse rather than better for her:

*Maya: Primary school was the only time they told Child Protection and Welfare. Welfare didn’t do anything. Child Protection rang mum and said, ‘What’s the go? Your daughter is coming to school with bruises.’ They would try and look into it and Mum always used to lie her arse off to get out of it, so we weren’t taken off her. And then, as soon as I got home from when the phone call was being take, I’d get a belting because apparently, I lied.*

Compounding physical abuse occurring at home, Maya’s constant bullying at school contributed to overwhelming misery and self-hatred that lead to suicide attempts. Together, her abuse, being bullied at school, and finally the death of her grandfather lead to a breaking point in her first year of high school, during which she started running away from home *and* school, both of which she experienced as unsafe places:

*Maya: And because I was diagnosed at the age of six with ADHD and Aspergers, like I’m on medications and stuff and it was pretty hard for me through primary school getting bullied, because I used to be a big girl, like, through primary school, all primary school, all my whole life, entire schooling I’ve been bullied…They’ve made me hate myself, like I still hate myself, I’m always going to hate myself because of what they’ve done to me. They’ve stuffed my life up basically…I used to get bashed…And then I left, because I was running away, I dropped out of high [school].*

For Maya, dropping out of school and couch surfing ‘everywhere’ separated her from her school community and embedded her in a stressful and ‘scary’ life in which her personal safety was at risk, she constantly had to find places to stay, and was exposed to other harms, including drug use and drug-related crime:

*Maya: I was using ice. I’m still using marijuana, because it’s calming – it calms me down…but back then I smoked ice pretty badly, real bad.*

*Catherine: And how would you pay for it?*

*Maya: It was – I wasn’t paying for it. I wasn’t paying for it, it was people I hanged out with who were giving it. They go out and steal stuff, then sell the profit of what – and then get the rock, obviously, the ice, bring it back and then we’ve got it, like, that’s how it would work.*

*Catherine: And because you were staying with them you were, sort of, just invited to join in?*

*Maya: Yeah, I was more, like, you stay in this house, you’re going to be on this, kind of thing.*

*Catherine: So what exactly do you mean by that?*

*Maya: So if I didn’t have a [ice] pipe out of my mouth they wouldn’t let me stay on the couch at the house. So if I didn’t give them what they wanted, I’d be out on the streets.*

*Catherine: So why do you think you couldn’t…?*

*Maya: …because I was too scared to say no. Because why would any fourteen year old girl – thirteen year old girl go on the streets – no – it’s the life changing experience…It was a scary part of my life at that time – my life was scary.*

What these brief insights into children’s experiences begin to illustrate is the lived connection between trauma, dysregulated behaviour, school bullying, and early school and home leaving. Such trajectories into schoollessness and unaccompanied homelessness must be understood as distinct to the challenges faced by children in the context of family homelessness. Whilst high mobility, bullying, and stigma are reported as common experiences for children who experience homelessness as part of a family group (see for example Tierney & Hallett, 2012), in these interviews children describe a distinctive trajectory into school disengagement and unaccompanied homelessness triggered by experiences of early childhood trauma and family breakdown.

Further, these excerpts raise questions about how schools could be involved in the earlier identification of children’s struggles and how they could work to increase the stability of schooling. As discussed in the following section, however, where schools are not well-resourced they can remain hostile sites for children at risk of or actively experiencing homelessness alone.

**The mutual reinforcement of unaccompanied homelessness and schoollessness**

Internationally, research consistently demonstrates that increasing numbers of children and youth experiencing homelessness face extensive barriers in receiving public education services (see for example Murphy, 2011; Pavlakis, 2018; Rafferty, 1995; Tierney & Hallett, 2012) and have poorer educational outcomes in comparison with their homed peers (see for example Deck, 2017; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Miller, 2011a). There is less research which focuses on the additional educational barriers and harms experienced by unaccompanied homeless youth (see Bradley, 2011; Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice, 2012; Murphy & Tobin, 2012) and very little with an explicit focus on unaccompanied homeless children under 18 (see Robinson 2018).

The educational barriers and harms of homelessness described in this literature are summarised under commonly identified themes below. Many of these impacts are experienced by all children and youth without access to safe, stable housing; highlighted in particular are the additional barriers posed by being homeless under 18 without an accompanying parent or guardian. The specific challenges to survival faced by these children directly shape the limited ways in which they able to access, attend, and engage in school. This throws into relief the extent to which public education systems assume and rely on the presence of a consistent, able, and actively supportive parent in delivering their services. The assumed presence of stable accommodation, so necessary in accessing and remaining engaged in school, is likewise demonstrated.

***Difficulty accessing school***

Whilst the universal ability to access an education is agreed in national law and through the Convention on the Rights of the Child, research commonly identifies that homeless children and youth face barriers to school enrollment. Even where the educational rights of homeless children and youth are uniquely protected and supported under specific national legislation in the USA, significant barriers to enrollment continue.

The right to receive an education in a local area public school is in fact a *conditional* right, normally requiring prior evidence of residency in the relevant area. As homelessness is defined by a lack of access to stable housing and is often experienced as rough sleeping, doubling up, couch-surfing with extended family, friends, and acquaintances, and staying in time-limited supported accommodation facilities, this criteria for school enrollment is a major barrier. Further criteria, such as being able to produce identification, immunisation documents, and previous school records, are also likely to delay or obstruct school enrollment. For children not in the physical custody of a parent or guardian and for whom contact with such carers may not be possible or pose a safety risk, a lack of legal authorisation to enroll can be another significant barrier.

***High geographic mobility***

Homelessness is not only characterised by the lack of a safe, secure home but by the high mobility this triggers. Unaccompanied homeless children may be less likely or able to access supported accommodation facilities due their young age and are more likely to couch-surf amongst multiple households which may be located in dispersed geographic locations. As such, travel to the school of original enrolment may be difficult once children have left home and have limited income and limited support to access free transport where this may be available. Importantly, even if enrollment barriers are overcome, children may be forced to make multiple geographic and school moves and experience significant learning loss during times of relocation and orientation to new school communities.

Given the well-documented impacts of trauma on children’s physiological development and capacity for focused learning (see Hobbs et al., 2019) and higher rates of learning disability (Murphy, 2011, p. 46), homeless children are likely to require increased access to trauma-skilled academic and professional supports at school as well as assessment for special needs. Research suggests however that barriers to school access and higher school mobility, as well as inadequate resourcing, means access to additional supports and assessment is limited or drawn-out (Murphy, 2011, p. 47; Rafferty, 1995, p. 47).

***Cumulative trauma, stigma, and bullying***

Unaccompanied children can become readily stigmatised by school staff who may lack the training and resources needed to identify and respond appropriately to the developmental and behavioural impacts of cumulative trauma and the physical strain and disorientation of being homeless alone. The attitudes of staff can impact children’s confidence in notifying authority figures about their lack of guardianship and homelessness.

A cycle of highly reactive and violent behaviour can lead to children feeling unwanted or disliked by staff, to their easy identification as targets of school bullying, and to ongoing suspensions and expulsions from school. As a site of potential stigmatisation, bullying, and significant learning struggle, school can become yet another unsafe, triggering, or re-traumatising space for unaccompanied homeless children which they may choose to avoid, reject, and escape.

***Low attendance***

School and housing mobility, physical and mental health issues, difficulty sourcing adequate nutrition, transport, and school supplies, and ongoing violent victimisation can all translate into increased school absence. Further, increased use of drugs and alcohol and the immediate need to find safe accommodation may lead to the perceived reduced importance of attending school regularly or all. As illustrated in the life story excerpts above, high rates of suspension and exclusion – often connected with children’s own violent, trauma-related behaviours – can also lead to significant school absence.

Part-time school and online learning can also feature in homeless children’s schooling. These options can negatively impact attendance as children face barriers in using technology and may see limited value in attending for a small number of hours relative to the effort and stress this may entail (see Robinson, 2018, p. 50-53). Finally, without the daily support of parents to assertively encourage school attendance and practically coordinate all that is required to attend, including shoes and uniform, transport, lunch, technology, and excursion and activity permissions and payments, unaccompanied children may find the challenge of independent school attendance overwhelming and insurmountable.

***Low attainment and early school leaving***

It is unsurprising that given the barriers to learning outlined above, research reports that in comparison with their homed (and homed, low-income) peers, homeless children perform below grade level, are disproportionately held back a grade, and are less likely to finish high school (Murphy, 2011, p. 48-49). The doubled instability in housing and schooling homeless children can experience has been shown to have direct association with problematic classroom engagement and lower academic achievement in both reading and maths, and increase the likelihood of suspensions, expulsions, and early school leaving (Deck, 2017; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Tierney & Hallett, 2012).

Most significantly these immediately negative educational impacts to which schools paradoxically contribute, can have lifelong ripple effects. Research suggests that lower educational attainment is *bi-directionally* associated with youth homelessness (Kull et al., 2019). This means that whilst homelessness impacts on the ability of young people to excel in their schooling, poorer educational outcomes also increase the likelihood of youth homelessness. For example, young adults who have not completed high school have been shown to be at least four and half times more likely to report experiencing homelessness than their peers who have (Kull et al., 2019, p. 11). As such, low educational attainment can be understood as potentially both a consequence and cause of homelessness.

**Reforming the engagement of schools with unaccompanied homeless children**

Schools, as the only statutorily available space universally available to children, have a uniquely powerful role and a responsibility to hold onto unaccompanied homeless children through the cumulative trauma and stress they may experience. Not only are they well-placed to play a central role in the early identification of emerging care issues, through holding children firm in their schooling they can actively contribute to the long-term recovery, healing, and resilience of those who may otherwise experience continued risk of homelessness and schoollessness in their lives. Creating opportunities for learning and subsequent employment and economic independence can be understood as one key mechanism to divert unaccompanied homeless children from a path of only learning to be ‘marginal adults’ (Murphy, 2011, p. 51).

However, it is clear that while homelessness poses extreme challenges to school engagement, *schools themselves* significantly contribute to unaccompanied homeless children’s learning loss and under-achievement through exclusionary and delaying bureaucratic processes, insufficient student needs identification, and under-resourced student management and support.

Reforming the ways in which schools treat unaccompanied homeless children involves change and innovation in policy, programs, school culture, and individual practice. Outlined in this section are promising reform directions unfolding across all these domains, including the bold federal legislative provisions first initiated in the US in 1987 aimed at addressing education equity for children and young people experiencing homelessness. Operational and cultural changes in schools and increased individual staff training and support are also considered, with a particular focus on the emerging interest in a whole-of-school implementation of trauma-informed practice.

Research makes consistently clear, however, that increasing the wellbeing of unaccompanied homeless children, including their educational wellbeing, requires collaboration and the integration of supports across schools and social services. Such integrated effort aims to concurrently address the interwoven issues of homelessness and schoollessness in the lives of unaccompanied children. In addition to targeted internal reform, schools need explicit integration with allied government and community child, youth, and family services, through which the shared vision of enabling all children to thrive can be implemented in a coordinated way.

***Policy reform***

The problematic relationship between schools and homelessness is an issue dominated by policy, advocacy, and academic debates in the US which to a large extent focus on reform of mainstream schools, beginning with the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006; Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017; Rafferty, 1995). Along with provision for other homelessness assistance measures, the McKinney Act authorised the Education for Homeless Children and Youth Program to guide the appropriate and equitable response of school districts to the educational needs of homeless children and youth.

As Tierney and Hallett (2012) outline it, the overarching principle of the Act is to ensure that all students have access to public education regardless of their housing status. The subsequent re-authorisation of the Act requires public schools to monitor and report on numbers of students experiencing homelessness, to provide uniforms, school supplies, and transport, and most importantly to facilitate the timely (within 48 hours) enrolment of homeless children regardless of residency, immunisation, and previous school records. Maintaining the stability of educational experience guides mandated flexibility about school access and transfer, regardless of the geographic mobility of students.

The appointment of Homeless Liaisons who monitor and report on how successfully schools enable access for homeless students in all school districts and practically coordinate support and distribute school supplies is another notable element of the Act’s implementation (see Havlik et al., 2016 for further discussion), as is the entitlement to expedited special needs assessment where this is needed (Ausikaitis et al., 2015, p. 710). Further funding supports mainstream schools to provide increased support for student engagement in a broader context in which segregation of homeless students in alternative schools is not allowed. In the school district that Tierney and Hallet (2012, p. 62) describe, such funds are utilised to pay for homeless education counselors who have responsibility for training school staff, in particular school counsellors and administrative staff who mediate students’ first contact with schools.

Whilst there is an array of research describing the extremely limited interpretation and implementation of the Act (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017), its problematic requirement for students to disclose their status as homeless to schools (Ausikaitis et al., 2015, p. 715) and its weak monitoring and legal enforcement (Aviles de Bradley, 2008; Crook, 2015; Massachusetts Appleseed Center for Law and Justice and Appleseed Washington, 2012; Pavlakis, 2014), in the international context the Act remains a theoretically radical policy intervention that triggers continued reform of school funding, operations, and accountability, increased awareness of homelessness amongst school communities, and improved face-to-face practice with homeless students. While Departments of Education may offer guidance on effectively serving homeless students (see for example Department of Education and Early Childhood Education, 2009), the lack of legislative authority and potential invisibility can mean, where they exist, such guidance is even easier to ignore. As such, as Miller (2011b, p. 444) emphasises, the value of legislation is to instigate *systemic* reform to ensure the inclusion of homeless students.

***School reform***

Regardless of the broader policy framework within which schools operate, there are clearly identified directions for reform at individual school level which could positively impact on the wellbeing of unaccompanied homeless children and reduce the educational impact of their homelessness. As already noted, the response of schools to unaccompanied homeless children is key to their long-term survival and independence. Actively identifying and addressing bureaucratic blocks to rapid, full-time access to public mainstream schools and the services these schools incorporate is the cornerstone of an educationally just response to unaccompanied homeless children.

Increased mainstream school access is also highly significant as an *immediate* response to unaccompanied homeless children who may disproportionately rely on school-based services, including food programs, shelter, heating and cooling, amenities, adult supervision and relative safety, physical, cognitive, mental and sexual health assessments and services, basic school nursing programs, and uniform support. Refusing, delaying, or reducing access to school, including through the use of suspensions and expulsions and online or part-time enrolment, can not only limit children’s access to education but in turn limit their access to the additional material and emotional resources a school may provide. Most importantly, it may increase their exposure to harm as they are unlikely to have alternative safe and supervised places in which to spend their time.

***Practice reform***

Research commonly argues that awareness-raising and specific training are needed as part of any school’s strategic response to engaging unaccompanied homeless children and are particularly important for teachers, who are often the first to be confronted with the distressing impacts of unaccompanied homelessness on children and who need to provide skilled classroom responses (see for example Julianelle, 2008; Tobin et al., 2018). Professional school staff -- such as counsellors, psychologists, speech therapists, and social workers -- also have a central role to play in responding to individual children, ideally through relationship-based therapeutic intervention as opposed to crisis management and attending to students’ immediate basic needs (see Havlik et al., 2017-18).

However, the development of whole school communities who have skilled awareness of trauma, poverty, and unaccompanied homelessness requires much more than the presence of a professional workforce. It instead relies on school leadership teams to intentionally implement a culture of awareness and continual skill development for all staff, including teaching, administrative and grounds staff (National Centre for Homeless Education, 2017). Here the systemic or whole-of-school implementation of trauma-informed practice within school operations, policies and processes, classroom settings, *and* in individual work with affected students offers one obvious reform direction (Australian Childhood Foundation, 2010; Mendez et al., 2018).

Additionally, research suggests that specific training within schools on homelessness is needed to support schools to understand legislative and policy directives on responding to homeless students and how to implement these, to identify homeless students and provide extra academic support targeted to their unique learning needs, to implement evidence-based approaches to behaviour management, and to create classrooms which can accommodate the lived impacts of homelessness, including hunger, exhaustion, and psychological distress (Hallet et al., 2015; MacGillivray et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2015; Murphy & Tobin, 2012; Thielking et al., 2017; Yamaguchi et al., 1997). Further, understanding that unaccompanied homeless children may struggle to find a safe, supportive connection with an adult, the life-changing role that the skilled engagement of a single teacher or a school mentor cannot be under-estimated (Ausikaitis et al., 2015; Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Havlik et al., 2016; Mendez et al., 2018).

***Cross-agency and cross-sector reform***

There is significant reform work that schools need to take sole responsibility for, if children at risk of becoming unaccompanied and homeless are to be identified early and actively supported to stay at school whatever their subsequent care and housing pathways. However, schools also have many allies in various government and community social services which work to provide support to families, parents, children, and youths. If the efforts of schools and social services can be coordinated and aligned, it is more likely that both will realise positive outcomes and children will be more likely to stay at home and school and experience increased physical and mental wellbeing as a result.

Indeed, school-based early intervention relying on collaborative work between schools and community services has produced clear evidence of the high value of innovative coordination models (Schwann et al., 2018, p. 81). This is especially the case for Australia’s internationally adapted Geelong Model, which successfully utilises student population screening to identify need and prompt the early coordination of school and community support provision for children and young people at risk of homelessness and school disengagement (MacKenzie, 2018). Unique to this model is joint effort across schools and community services to drive the change which is required for ambitious place-based *system reform* (MacKenzie, 2018, p. 5; see also MacKenzie et al., 2020). This recognises that reform is needed in schools, in community services and in the ways in which both are envisaged and resourced to form an integrated system of support for children and young people.

Slowing the spread of such reform are the long-standing issues of sectors and services remaining trapped in circumscribed areas of provision and of few mechanisms to fund the time-consuming activity of collaboration itself, which would enable practice to begin to shift across departmental and service borders and past school gates.

**Conclusion: Educational wellbeing and the need for multi-perspective research**

Schools are an important anchor in child and adolescent development and have a dual role in identifying children at risk and nurturing potential in the lives of those who experience unaccompanied homelessness. It is entirely appropriate, then, to consider what strategic reform schools can undertake to strengthen their capacity to identify children’s needs early and to systemically, rather than individually, ensure education equity for children who experience homelessness alone.

It is also clear that improving the wellbeing of unaccompanied homeless children, including their educational wellbeing, is a shared goal of multiple sectors and services, none of which can alone realise lasting good outcomes in their work. As shown by the intellectual push towards homelessness prevention, accompanied by transferable models of collaborative practice with schools, research has a central role to play in driving reform in schools and in the role they play in the broader social services system. Internationally, the still largely disjointed and uneven journey towards strengthened, collaborative school-based homelessness prevention provides both impetus and opportunity for continued research on how to best bridge schools and other government and community services. The problematic lack of capacity for meaningful connection between schools and community services has been well-identified (Aviles de Bradley, 2011, p. 170; Miller, 2012, p. 832), but similar consideration of barriers to the increased coordination of education with other government services is also needed.

In this, research that captures the experiences and needs of all stakeholders who must be involved in successful collaboration remains a significant contribution. Where schools and social services can more easily identify shared goals, knowledge, practice, need, and benefit, a ‘joined-up’ approach is more likely to emerge (Crane & Livock, 2012). For example, better illustrating what frustrates the efforts of both community-based youth services (Robinson, 2018) and schools (Martin, 2014) to proactively work with children experiencing homelessness and school disengagement is a crucial step in imagining cross-sector system change.

Further, research can fundamentally radicalise and energise reform by making schools, services *and children* more visible to each other. Capturing and learning from the unique voices of unaccompanied homeless children themselves, in particular those whose homelessness and school struggle may also be racialised or intersect with stigmatised sexual orientation or gender identity (Aviles de Bradley, 2015; Ellis & Geller, 2016; Tierney & Ward, 2017), is politically compelling. It is stories from children -- both positive and critical -- that will best inform, connect, and hold accountable, systems of care and education.

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