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## The Role of Teachers in Identifying and Supporting Homeless Secondary School Students: Important Lessons for Teacher Education

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## **The Role of Teachers in Identifying and Supporting Homeless Secondary School Students: Important Lessons for Teacher Education**

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*Abstract: Young people entering homelessness often do so while still at school. This study explores Australian teachers' and other student support staff perspectives of the experiences of students who are running away from home, the barriers to student help-seeking, and how local youth services can best support secondary schools to provide necessary services to keep students at school and at home or in some other form of safe and secure accommodation. The study revealed that although teachers and student support staff report awareness that student couch surfing exists; there are a range of barriers which prevent a student from seeking help. Teachers called for stronger relationships between schools and youth homelessness services to achieve a more effective and informed early intervention response. Teachers also asked for guidance on how to respond when students are homeless. The overall results have important implications for teacher education and practice as well as informing education welfare policies.*

### **Introduction**

In Australia, young people under the age of 25 currently account for more than 42% of the homeless population. As at the last census date in 2011, it was estimated that 44,000 young people were homeless (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2011, 2012). Youth homelessness typically refers to those aged 12 to 24, however those who are secondary school aged make up 41% of the homeless youth cohort (ABS, 2012). It is likely, however, that this figure is much higher due to difficulties associated with counting this transient and often hidden cohort. For example, the ABS has acknowledged that there are difficulties counting homeless youth due to the high prevalence of 'in and out of home' behavior in this age group, which is partially, albeit inadequately captured in their census item '*persons staying temporarily in other households*' (ABS, 2012). A count in this category may not necessarily mean that young people are experiencing homelessness by temporarily staying away from home due to conflict or other issues. As the ABS states: "Their homelessness is masked because their characteristics look no different to other youth who are not homeless but are simply visiting on Census night. A usual address may be reported for 'couch surfers' either because the young person doesn't want to disclose to the people they are staying with that they are unable to go home, or the person who fills out the Census form on behalf of the young person staying with them assumes that the youth will return to their home" (ABS, 2012, p.57).

The word 'homeless' is often used to describe people who are living on the streets or

who are ‘without a roof over their heads’. Whilst this situation describes one form of homelessness, it does not conceptualise the entire spectrum of the homelessness experience, particularly the ‘youth’ homeless experience. The ABS definition of homelessness (operationalised in the 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census) is broader than ‘rough sleeping’ and includes living in a dwelling which is considered inadequate; not having a legitimate tenancy agreement or one that is short and unable to be extended; and not being able to control or have access to space for social relations, including overcrowding (ABS, 2012). The ABS definition built on what was termed the ‘cultural’ definition of homelessness, which denoted homelessness as a state of living in a dwelling that was below minimum community standards (Chamberlain & MacKenzie, 1992). The ‘lack of security in tenure’ aspect of this definition also accounts for ‘couch surfing’ behavior (couch surfing also being the term used in Australian and international literature on this topic), and describes young people who are living in and out of temporary short-term stays away from home because of difficulties within their home environment.

### **Couch Surfing**

Research on couch surfing in homeless youth populations reveals that it often involves staying at friends’ houses or moving between temporary forms of accommodation with typically rent-free arrangements (McLoughlin, 2013). It often occurs because young people are running away from a problem at home (Thielking, Flatau, La Sala & Sutton, 2015). Couch surfing contradicts the stereotypical idea of a ‘street kid’ that most Australians associate with youth homelessness (Homelessness Australia, 2014). It represents a largely hidden form of homelessness and has, in many ways, been excluded from the wealth of research conducted on homeless youth (McLoughlin, 2013).

There are both structural and individual factors that are linked to youth homelessness (Fehring, Shacklock & Crowhurst, 2008). Young people entering homelessness usually do so because they are escaping from an untenable home situation (Cauce et al., 2000). Abuse, family conflict and a breakdown of interpersonal relationships are the most common precursors to young people running away (National Youth Commission, 2008). A troubled home life may have been evident over many years prior to running away, and recent Australian research shows that in a sample of 300 homeless young people, 39% of the sample reported police coming to their family home due to domestic violence when they were children; and 63% had been in some kind of out-of-home care arrangement by the time they had turned 18 (Flatau et al., 2015). However, the experience of being homeless can be traumatic in and of itself (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010) as demonstrated in a recent Australian study where one homeless young person stated: “(the) scariest thing that has happened to me was being homeless even for a short time” (Flatau et al., 2015, p1).

### **Youth Homelessness Prevention**

One of the keys to preventing entry into youth homelessness is to implement a targeted early intervention strategy when risk of homelessness becomes evident. More often than not, evidence of risk would first appear whilst the young person is still attending school. Early identification of at risk students and referral to appropriate support, such as a local youth homelessness service is vital to prevent the transition into entrenched homelessness and associated problems related to this phenomenon. Unfortunately, recent Australian research has found that young people are not coming to the attention of local youth homelessness services until the later stages of their homelessness experience, often when they

have already left home and school and when their issues have become even more complex and severe (Thielking et al., 2015). This is problematic and reflects previous findings that the longer a young person is in a state of homelessness, the more likely they are to have significant mental health issues, engage in risky behaviours and experience violence (Mallet, Rosenthal & Keys, 2005). A significant opportunity to mitigate these outcomes is to intervene early while young people are still at school.

In a recent study by Thielking et al., (2015) it was found that the majority of homeless young people still attended secondary school whilst being in the 'in and out of home' stage. This finding reflects an important opportunity for schools to be more involved in the identification, support and prevention of youth homelessness. Previous policy initiatives in Australia have identified schools as playing an important role in the intervention and prevention of youth homelessness (see Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1989). However, despite awareness by researchers that schools can play a fundamental role in the early intervention and prevention of youth homelessness, anecdotal evidence suggests that collaborative and long lasting relationships between schools and local youth services are not being built and teachers feel largely unprepared to adequately respond to students who are facing this predicament.

#### **The Role Schools Can Play to Keep Students at School and in Safe and Secure Accommodation**

Running away from home reflects, in many cases, an act of defence against family conflict and violence (Cauce et al., 2000). However, it may also represent the beginning of a 'slippery slope' into exiting from education, rough sleeping, mental health difficulties and social isolation. When young people are not in a supportive home environment, are without secure accommodation and are dealing with issues of family conflict or other personal traumas, keeping up with the demands of school is extremely difficult. Attendance may be affected; the young person may exhibit behavioural problems due to mental health issues and other stressors; or not have the resources to participate in every day school activities, eventually causing them to drop out of school or even being asked to leave. One obvious consequence of early school leaving is that a young person is under qualified or does not have the necessary skills to participate in the workforce (Fehring et al., 2008), possibly leading to a lifetime of disadvantage. In Chamberlain and MacKenzie's (2006) five-stage 'homelessness career' model, which outlines the typical progression of young people from being at risk of homelessness to being chronically homeless, exit from school represents a key dividing line.

For some young people who are facing possible homelessness, school represents a safe and familiar environment, which may foster resilience and self-worth and buffer the impact of a troubled home life (Benard, 1997). Maintaining involvement and personal connections at school is important in order to minimize feelings of isolation and to maintain connections with community. At school, young people build important supportive relationships with their peers and school staff and during an experience of actual or possible homelessness, these relationships are critical in coping with such adversity (Moore & McArthur, 2011). Furthermore, school teachers and other school staff are often perceived by young people as reliable adults in their lives who they interact with daily. Because of this, school teachers are often the first to notice early warning signs, changes in behaviour and other characteristics that signify changes in housing states (Moore & McArthur, 2011). In a study by Moore and McArthur (2011) it was reported that irregular attendance was a noticeable characteristic of a student who may be 'in and out of home'.

### **Supporting Students to Access the Help They Need**

There are a number of ways that a homeless or at risk young person may access help from teachers and other student support staff within a school. One option is that students may seek help themselves (on their own or with a friend). They may speak to a teacher, school counsellor or other trusted member of school staff and let them know about their situation. Or, teachers or school staff may identify them as being in need of support and this may result in a referral and/or being accompanied to an appropriate service. Thirdly, parents or guardians themselves may alert the school of difficulties occurring in the home. Fourthly, other parents who may have a student staying for an extended period of time with them (i.e., couch surfing) may contact the school seeking guidance and support. Finally, outside professionals or agency workers may contact a school about a student who has come to their attention as requiring support for homelessness issues. The most recent Mission Australia *Youth Survey* found that over one third of the 13,600 youth respondents indicated that they would go to their teacher or school counsellor for help with important issues (Fildes, Robbins, Cave, Perremes & Warrig, 2014). Other research reveals that having external professionals visit the school and speak to students directly about what is available in their community is effective (i.e., Wilson, Deane, Marshall & Dalley, 2008). Whilst this is promising, it is also known that there are a number of barriers to young people seeking help, particularly those who have mental health issues (Rickwood, 2005), which is often the case for homeless youth (Flatau et al., 2015).

The most common barriers to help seeking are feelings of embarrassment and shame, not wanting to make the situation worse and receiving parental advice against seeking help (Moore & McArthur, 2011). Other findings suggest that young people do not know where to seek help, are not able to appropriately evaluate the seriousness of their situation, worry about others not maintaining confidentiality and about being judged or treated with disrespect (Rowe et al., 2014). A qualitative study of drug-using homeless youth in the United States found similar barriers to help-seeking, including a fear of stigma and discrimination, unwanted involvement of legal authorities and avoiding help due to long waiting times (Hudson et al., 2010).

Location also has a significant impact on whether or not young people choose to seek help. Living in a rural or regional setting has a number of barriers related to decreased capacity to remain anonymous and the logistics and costs associated with needing to travel to access services (Hodges, O'Brien, McGorry, 2007; Quine et al., 2003). Opportunities to access online support has been shown to be particularly important for young people in these locations.

### **The Research**

The research was conducted in the outer eastern region of Melbourne, Australia and aimed to investigate early stage homelessness in secondary school attending young people. In Australia, the usual age range of secondary school students is 11-18. It grew out of a concern held by local youth homelessness services that young people were only accessing their services when they were in crisis and had, by then, permanently left home and school. This research seeks to explore secondary teachers' and other secondary school staff perspectives of the experiences of students who are running away from home, barriers to student help-seeking in the school environment, and how local youth services can best support secondary schools to provide the necessary services to keep students at school and at home (or in some other form of safe and secure accommodation). This provides valuable data for schools,

community youth agencies and for teachers who are intending to work in the secondary school environment.

The current research was guided by four specific research questions.

From the perspectives of secondary teachers and school staff:

1. What are the experiences of secondary students who are 'in and out of home'?
2. What are the major barriers preventing secondary students from seeking help?
3. What role can secondary school teachers play in identifying, supporting and preventing youth homelessness?
4. How can local youth services better support secondary schools and provide appropriate assistance to students who are at risk of or experiencing homelessness?

## **Sampling and Methodology**

Data was collected as part of a joint research project between Swinburne University of Technology, Anchor Youth Services, the Outer Eastern Local Learning and Employment Network and the University of Western Australia Centre for Social Impact. Ethical approval to conduct the study was granted from Swinburne University Human Research Ethics Committee and the Department of Health Human Research Ethics Committee.

A qualitative approach was chosen for this study to explore the perspectives of teachers and other student support staff, such as school psychologists and social workers, who have interacted with homeless or at risk secondary students. This method is shown to be effective for exploring sensitive and personal issues in an in-depth way (Creswell, 2012). A total of 13 secondary schools, and education and training providers to secondary school-aged young people in the region, were invited to participate in the research, resulting in a total of 12 school/education providers being represented. Seventeen teaching and student support staff participated in interviews lasting between 40 minutes and one hour. A semi-structured interview guide was used to conduct the interviews. Participants (secondary teachers and secondary student support staff) were asked about their experiences with students who were attending school but who are in the 'in and out of home' stage, as well as their perception of the barriers for young people and their families in accessing services outside of the school. Finally, participants were asked about their perception of how local youth services could best support them and their schools in providing early intervention and prevention support.

Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and coded in NVivo10. Qualitative data was then analysed using a semantic level coding system in order to group together common themes.

## **Findings**

### **Teachers and Student Support Staff Perspectives on the Experiences of Students Who Are 'In and Out of Home'**

When asked about their perspective of the experiences of students who are attending secondary school but are also 'in and out of home', teachers and school staff primarily reflected on problematic issues within the family as the main causal factor for young people not being at home. Other than two participants who mentioned personal characteristics of the student as causing them to be homeless (e.g., a strive for independence and rejecting boundaries), it was suggested that the primary reason for students being 'in and out of home' was due to stress related to family poverty, family breakdown or separation, parent mental health issues, incidents of previous trauma in the student's life or violence within the family home.

*There's very little in the way of money with the home family, violent siblings, the home is just not tenable... there's lots of fighting at home.*

and

*I think it's probably more the situation is just too much at home and they want out.*

There was consensus among all teachers and student support staff that early phase homelessness most often consisted of students staying between friend's places. While it was thought that staying with friends or partners was the most common places to stay, some also spoke of 'couch surfing' between different extended family members or swapping between "mum and dad's place" due to an avoidance of conflict in the home with either mum or dad. Teachers and student support staff also spoke of students' tendency to seek relationships or friendships with others who may allow them to stay overnight. A number of participants noted that this experience was particularly true for young women who were not living at home. Participants mentioned that when these relationships ended, students would again seek relationships with peers who offered the same opportunity to stay over. Importantly, when discussing instances of couch surfing or staying with friends/partners, participants acknowledged the rate at which young people quickly "burn their bridges" or simply wear out their stays. They are then forced to find somewhere else to stay.

The majority of teachers and student support staff also commented on how students who are in this early stage of homelessness would most likely not identify the term 'couch surfing' with homelessness. They asserted that couch surfing students do not recognize that they need to seek help and are not cognizant of how much couch surfing represents a 'slippery slope' into early school leaving and chronic homelessness.

*Because if they're staying at a friend's house, they're not homeless in their mind. Yeah. Unless they're living on the street, in the gutter, in the pipe at the playground, they're not homeless.*

### **Teachers and Student Support Staff Perspectives on Major Barriers to Seeking Help**

Teachers and student support staff reflected on the barriers to help seeking experienced by students at risk of homelessness. This discussion acknowledged that there were barriers to help seeking for the students themselves, but also barriers for the parents and families involved. While the majority of these barriers are individual in nature (i.e., embarrassment, stigma, fear of judgement), another cluster of barriers emerged based on location, given the non-metropolitan location of the sample in this study. Each of the major themes relating to barriers to help-seeking will now be presented.

#### **Student Individual Barriers to Help-Seeking**

A lack of knowledge and awareness of support services was considered to be the most common barrier to help seeking. The majority of participants believed that students were largely unaware of what services were available or how such services could support them. Teachers and student support staff also perceived other individual factors, such as being fearful of the unknown, having a strong dislike of retelling their story, and being hesitant to trust other adults, were also barriers to help seeking. A fear of stigma, embarrassment and general anxiety around help seeking behaviour was said to further contribute to an overall hesitancy in asking for support.

*There's probably just that element of: 'I don't know what this is', you know? 'What am I walking into here? Who are these people? What do they want with my life?' and so I think there's still that element.*

and

*I think that kids go, 'well I've had issues with adults, so are these adults gonna try and just tell me to go back to mum and dads? I think it's more of that.*

A number of teachers and student support staff also mentioned that an intergenerational and peer-led fear of child protection or other authorities further contributed to students' reluctance to seek support. Teachers and school staff felt that this fear was especially strong for those young people who have had a previous negative experience with welfare authorities. Participants spoke about students having a fear of being taken away from home, placed in to care or being relocated to another area. They also spoke about students who they had known who preferred to sleep rough in a neighbourhood they knew rather than risk being relocated away from familiar surrounds. It was the opinion of some participants that students immediately consider child protection and/or welfare services as an authority that would not allow them to exercise control or autonomy over their life and would make decisions for them.

*You mentioned [child protection service]. And these are kids that might not have secure home lives and need [child protection service] intervention, but it's – No. No. I hate [child protection service] (Name changed to protect anonymity).*

#### **Parent/Guardian Barriers to Help-Seeking**

Similar to the identified barriers to student help-seeking referred to in this study, the majority of teachers and student support staff believed that parents/guardians lacked appropriate knowledge about what support services were available or what help they were entitled to acted as a barrier to seeking help. In contrast, a small number of participants thought that families were aware of services, but were reluctant to use them because of a fear of judgment and embarrassment. Some participants also believed that parents/guardians did not realize that their child, who was running away or couch surfing, fit the criteria of homelessness.

*Parents are not wanting help because we're gonna think they're not doing their job, that kind of stuff. By asking for help I'm not doing my job properly. I'm not looking after my kids properly.*

Similar to the concern of students, participants believed that some families were afraid of protective or welfare services involvement, and do not want authorities becoming aware of the challenging situation at home. There was a belief among teachers and student support staff that this fear stopped families from seeking help early in the hope that they could contain the issue themselves and prevent authorities becoming aware of the situation their child was in. Participants in this study deemed this phenomenon especially problematic. Students as young as 12 or 13 were sometimes identified by teachers and student support staff as experiencing homelessness, which resulted in a professional dilemma for school staff as on one hand they had a legal duty to notify child protection about children aged 16 years and under who were deemed to be in unsafe situations, whilst on the other hand students and their families often hid their situation or asked that no external agencies become involved for fear of it being revealed to authorities and making the situation worse.

*Age. That's the biggest barrier and my god it's bad because they're all under 15 or 16. And they're all experiencing – they're all high maintenance and stuff,*



*and there's not a lot of services out there to cater for them. It's [child protection service] and only [child protection service].*

Teachers and student support staff also raised a number of practical barriers that they believed prevented parents and families from seeking help (e.g., cost, time-commitment, accessibility). Family poverty was noted as a significant barrier and they believed that services, such as a visit to the GP, were too costly for some families. A lack of time to keep up with multiple appointments and referrals was another barrier that school staff believed families faced. They felt that if local services increased accessibility and availability, parents and family members would be more inclined to seek support from services and would benefit from the support they received.

*Finance is an issue too. The second they have to pay for the service, suddenly, they can't afford it.*

and

*...it's actually time as well, and they're taking time off work to deal with the school matters and then they have to take time off work to deal with the resolution process.*

### **Location Based Barriers**

Many of the students and families that participants referred to in this study lived in small towns and rural municipalities. This meant that many of the services available to support students were located in larger towns, most often where the students attended secondary school, but this was a distance away from where they reside. It was explained that students had to catch a number of buses between where they lived and where they attended secondary school, meaning that outside of the school day they spent very little time in the larger towns where support services are most commonly situated. Participants said that students perceive the trip in to town as bothersome and difficult or even felt anxious about travelling on their own. In light of this, the majority of participants felt strongly about the need to provide available and accessible support to students in the actual suburbs that they reside or in the school itself. For this community, in addition to family poverty, isolation and limited accessibility (by way of transport) were mentioned as the two predominant barriers to help seeking.

*If you take kids who are anxious, nervous, distressed, all that sort of stuff, I'm afraid... If you go and say, "Oh. Let's go down to [suburb] ....You spend an hour and a half or two hours on the bus getting anxious and nervous about going to an appointment, as if you're actually not gonna turn around – they just don't get there.*

and

*What's come up is that it's an obvious thing now that the students don't necessarily live locally here, they might actually live in a different area to where the school is placed, [and] that services that are around the school are not necessarily the services...[where they live].*

Lastly, because of the geographical location of this study, 'small town issues' arose as being another identified difficulty in getting students to seek services. Issues surrounding confidentiality, privacy, trust and stigma were again brought up as being specific issues for the students in this regional area, as they were likely to be seen by others they knew when visiting a support service or may even know people who worked there.

### **What Role Can Teachers Play in Facilitating Help Seeking for Homeless Students?**

Teachers and student support staff felt that schools had a vital role in identifying and supporting student homelessness for two main reasons. Firstly, school staff can build a relationship of trust with students and as they see students nearly every day of the week, they are usually the first to notice signs of risk. Secondly, because of the major role schools play in students' lives, teachers and student support staff believed that students and their families internalised a preference for dealing with school staff rather than someone unfamiliar from an external agency, and many participants stated that teachers and student support staff felt a high degree of responsibility towards helping students and their families with such issues.

#### *Warning Signs of Actual and Possible Student Homelessness*

Teachers and student support staff described clear school-based signs or indicators that a student might not be at home. The most commonly mentioned identifiers were:

1. Uniform issues: not wearing the right uniform, wearing the same uniform repeatedly and/or wearing uniform that is noticeably unwashed
2. Attendance issues: consistently arriving late or arriving very early, and frequently skipping days
3. School work issues: not doing homework, not being able to keep up in class because of tiredness or distraction, falling behind in classes
4. Lunch issues: not bringing lunch to school or not having money for the canteen
5. Mental health issues: such as a severe decline in psychological wellbeing, behavioural issues and rule-breaking.

#### **Identification of Students at Risk of Homelessness**

Three main themes emerged in how schools identify or become aware of students requiring support. These were: (1) by the homeless student directly seeking help or disclosing the issues to school staff themselves; (2) by being explicitly told by others that there was a problem with a particular student; and, (3) through the school 'grapevine'.

Participants revealed that many students or families in their schools approached school staff themselves looking for help. This was mostly in instances where there was a good rapport already established between the student and a teacher. Further to this, 'other-report', such as by friends, peers or a friend's parent, was also a common way of finding out that a student was not returning home. Teachers and student support staff indicated that families and friends sometimes became concerned and contacted the school when another student was 'staying over a lot' or had overstayed their welcome, and were unsure what to do next.

Participants also mentioned the school 'grapevine', that is, hearing things by chance in the classroom or playground regarding a student's situation. This, coupled with noticing the early warning signs of homelessness, was said to help them to identify a potential issue that needed follow up with the student and their family.

*Sometimes other students might say, look I'm really worried about my friend who's off staying at all these different houses or all these different places or has just... like kids will use the term 'run away from home' a lot, so they might come in and say they've run away from home.*

### **Teacher and Student Staff Perspectives on How Local Youth Homelessness Services can Better Support Secondary Schools**

Teachers and student support staff were asked about the relationship between schools and local youth services and for their perspective on what local youth services could do to better support schools to deal with students at risk of homelessness. Three themes emerged in their discussions of this topic: the need for stronger relationships between schools and local youth homelessness services and for local youth homelessness services to have a presence within schools; the need for local youth homelessness services to work within the constraints and practicalities of education settings, especially in relation to curriculum needs; and a desire for a more integrated youth support services system.

#### **The Need for Stronger Relationships between Schools and Local Youth Homelessness Services and for Local Youth Homelessness Services to Have a Presence within Schools**

Participants discussed at length the importance of the need to actively build stronger relationships between schools and agencies, and between agencies and students *within the school setting*. They believed that this would open the doors of communication between education and community services and would break down any barriers students might face in travelling to an outside and unknown service. By building relationships with the students directly, participants felt that local youth homelessness services would become more familiar and approachable and students would feel more comfortable going to the agency to get the help they need.

*I think the youth services people, and I know it's funding and it's time, but them coming actually into the school and the students can see them, they'll see, 'oh they're young, they're cool', and in that fun way, they're engaging and linking with the students and that, I think, will give the students confidence to approach [the service].*

The majority of participants also felt that by having support services working with the students directly in the schools that this would not only educate students on what support is available, but would assist in reducing the level of distrust students and families may feel toward welfare agencies. Participants also felt that this would help to reduce stigma or shame that may be preventing them from contacting services for assistance. A number of participants also said that having services come to school would assist teachers and student support staff to know who to go to when external support was needed and having an individual from an agency come to the school on a regular basis was one of the main requests from participants in this study.

*It's hard because I get lots of information and stuff and I get brochures sent and all that sort of thing, but I never have enough time to do my job. No one does in this school; no one does in any support thing, I think. So, it kind of goes under the wire...If I'm connected to a particular person, that helps me go straightaway: 'Okay, this is where I could send that person if they need support'.*

#### **The Need for Local Youth Homelessness Services to Work within the Constraints and Practicalities of Education Settings, Especially in Relation to Curriculum Needs.**

Acknowledgement by local service providers of the practical barriers that schools faced, especially in relation to time and curriculum constraints, was also discussed. Providing schools with appropriate time frames and programs that fit in with their curriculum was

emphasised by a number of participants. It was revealed that whilst schools are happy to support external agencies to run wellbeing programs in their schools, in reality they receive a multitude of offers from youth services, but that they are, for the most part, impractical. For example, participants mentioned that they are never given enough lead-up time to implement the programs on offer (a minimum of 3-12 months' notice before implementation was needed), they often do not target all students (ideally whole year levels should be involved) and they are sometimes too expensive (even \$5 per student may be too expensive and difficult to obtain from parents).

*...often we'll get things that might be good, saying 'could you do this program?' or 'we'd like to come in to the school and do this'. And we've got like a weeks notice or two weeks notice which is completely unrealistic.*

### **A Desire for a More Integrated Youth Support Services System**

The majority of teachers and student support staff emphasised their desire for a more integrated service system. They mentioned that schools were often bombarded with information about external services and programs and at times did not know who to contact or which service was worthwhile. Participants mentioned that it was overwhelming how many services there were, and that families and parents might also be confused as to which service to contact. They said that this is also made more difficult by some services having extensive waiting times, multiple staff members allocated to a student (which means story telling is repeated) and being located out of the immediate region. Further to this, participants emphasised the need to offer immediate, on the spot support to students and the difficulty of not knowing how to support students in a time of crisis.

*If I can't do anything about it and a lot of the times I can't, they [the student] don't bother because I don't have any emergency accommodation to access. I can't say I'm their safety plan, just pop down to the local police station if someone's being terrified 'cause it's not open. I can't say get on the bus and here's a card and go down and you go somewhere safe. There is no bus route. So unless I can do those [things], they're not gonna tell me because I can't make a difference*

### **Conclusion**

This study has provided important insights from teachers and school staff around the experiences of homeless secondary school students, barriers to help-seeking, warning signs and the role schools and youth homeless services can play in working together to provide an early intervention approach to this issue.

Similar to previous studies on youth homelessness (e.g., Flatau et al., 2015; Fehring et al., 2008), findings from teacher interviews suggested that the majority of at risk students engaged in 'couch surfing' among friends or partners' places when they first run away from home. They also mentioned that this form of homelessness may often go unnoticed as students themselves may not realise they are in a situation requiring professional support. Not being fully aware of the seriousness of the issues and opportunity that this early phase of homelessness holds as an optimal time for intervention (whilst young people are still at home and at school, albeit temporarily) is a noted barrier to help-seeking, of which there are many. Hence, if youth homelessness was in fact included in teacher education curriculum, it would go a long way towards improving teachers' ability to identify and respond to students at risk

of homelessness and early school leaving. Of particular relevance to this research, was barriers related to geographical location, which is also in line with previous research that shows that barriers to help seeking are even more prevalent among youth in non-metropolitan areas (Quine et al., 2003).

Teachers and student support staff identified family instability and conflict as a likely preceding factor to young people running away from home. This is consistent with previous findings where family conflict has been reported as a significant reason a young person leaves home, especially for those aged between 12 and 18 (Fehring et al., 2008). The strong link between family conflict and running away behaviour means that any support provided to young people in the 'in and out of home' phase should also, where possible, involve parents/guardians. Services such as Reconnect, which is a national youth homelessness program, that "uses early intervention strategies to help young people to stabilise and improve their housing, achieve family reconciliation, and improve their level of engagement with work, education, training and community" (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, date unknown, p.1) is one such example. The importance of maintaining connection with family members cannot be understated, as it has been shown to be a significant protective factor by which young people are facilitated out of homelessness (Mallett, Rosenthal, Keys & Averill, 2009), and interestingly, connection with the child's mother appears to most beneficial (Milburn et al., 2009). By making family support services both accessible to schools and an integral component of youth homelessness intervention strategies, services can better identify the issues creating conflict and instability within the family, and provide targeted interventions that help young people and their families to gain the necessary skills to cope and to foster healthy connections at home and at school. There is already a good degree of evidence showing that a range of family-focused interventions (such as family therapy or parenting skills) are effective in keeping young people at home and away from the specialist homelessness service system (e.g., Toro, Dworsky & Fowler, 2007). Teachers can play an important role in linking students and their families to such services.

It was encouraging that in this study, teachers and student support staff expressed a willingness and desire to work in a more integrated manner with local youth homelessness services. They spoke about the need for stronger and more collaborative relationships between the two sectors and a desire for in-school-delivered services (rather than expecting students to travel to services outside of the school setting). School staff revealed that low service-integration has resulted in them hesitating to refer students to 'outside' services. Fear of the unknown and their desire to protect students from the possibility of less than ideal interventions made referral a difficult option at times. This study shows that strong school-agency relationships are integral for school staff to feel that they can trust a service with 'their' students, who they very much care for. This is worth noting, as the complexity of issues that homeless young people face means that no one person or service can meet all of a young person's needs. This is why inter-agency integration and collaboration was posited as a key strategy for reducing youth homelessness in the Australian Government's Whitepaper, *The Road Home*, (National Taskforce, 2008) and so it is heartening that this research revealed a desire by those within the education sector to work more closely with youth homelessness services to support students.

Whilst this research is a first-step in understanding the experiences of homeless secondary students in general, the perspectives of teachers and student support staff who are at the coalface of early stage youth homelessness and who interact with vulnerable youth on a daily basis provides important insight in to the issues associated with this concerning phenomenon. This study builds on an important message to education providers on the important role that schools play in identifying and supporting at risk and homeless young

people to stay at school and at home and why youth homelessness needs to be addressed in teacher education curriculum. Given that young people begin to experience homelessness while they are at school, there is the potential to intervene and prevent homelessness at a very early stage through secondary schools and other education and training settings. It is hoped that early detection and intervention can prevent a student from reaching a chronic state of homelessness and early school leaving. It is anticipated that secondary teachers and those who are preparing and training teachers for their work in schools are able take away an important message from this research that secondary student homelessness does exist, and that although it is a complex issue, teachers and other student support staff can play a vital role in identifying, supporting and linking students to appropriate services.

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