



## ***Introduction: Recognizing Blind Spots in Teacher Education and Cultivating Counter-Narratives for Justice***

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### ***Abstract***

*This Special Issue Introduction outlines the underlying reasons for taking up the matter of educating homeless youth. The article addresses the lack of official policy and attention within teacher education programs to prepare future and practicing teachers for work with a growing homeless population—work that is legally mandated by the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Education Act.*

**Keywords:** *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, NCATE, CAEP, homeless youth, homeless education, teacher education*

The impetus for this special theme issue of *Critical Questions in Education* was the collaborative work of the Illinois McKinney-Vento Network and an urgent desire to call attention to an often ignored population—homeless youth. The Illinois McKinney-Vento Network consists of community activists, public school homeless liaisons, civil rights attorneys and academics dedicated to understanding, supporting and advocating for the legal framework and services outlined in the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The various constituencies represented within this organization recognize that the social problems embodied in homeless youth and families require the dedicated work of *many* from multiple vantage points. This work cannot be done in isolation—social problems of this magnitude require activists, educators, lawyers, scholars, and community members to work together for the betterment of policy and practices.

In the wake of the recent “financial meltdown” or, “the great recession,” there has been a significant rise in the number of families and youth experiencing homelessness and poverty. With the shifting housing circumstances manifested as a result of sub-prime mortgage failures, communities across America began to feel the impact of white-collar greed en masse.<sup>1</sup> Suddenly, traditionally defined at-risk urban and rural populations became even more entrenched in public policy as it relates to issues of poverty—housing, food, health care, jobs, general welfare; further, working class and middle class suburban populations not usually impacted by poverty and unstable housing became a part of this growing demographic. Schools often serve as a consistent point of contact for students experiencing instability, thus, educators in particular represent a front line in terms of advocating for said students and increasing their access to needed services. Such services are legally protected under McKinney-Vento, and ensure families and youth are

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1. Although not taken up in this theme issue, we acknowledge the *global* component to the current financial crisis that is important to fully understanding such a complex problem as homelessness in society.

cared for during such difficult times. We hope the articles in this special theme issue create and/or reinvigorate a much needed discussion of the ways in which schools and society can better address the academic and social needs of homeless youth.

### Recognizing Blind Spots in Teacher Education

Unfortunately, education in the United States has become myopically focused on standardization, academic achievement, and “objective” measurable data that can confirm that the proper learning has occurred. As a result, significant attention is spent dissecting instruction and curriculum through very narrow means, rather than working to understand deeply the needs of the learner beyond “college and career readiness.” To examine the attention given to ensuring that the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act is fully understood in teacher education programs, we turn to the standards that guide our practice.

The largest national voluntary accrediting agency of teacher education, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)—previously called the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE)—has never included the language of McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act in their standards, nor have they included the issue of homelessness as a concern in the description of student diversity. Rather, the legal obligation and responsibilities of educators has been mildly addressed in these organizations’ documents via the following language: “Before the provider recommends any completing candidate for licensure or certification, it documents that the candidate understands the expectations of the profession, including codes of ethics, professional standards of practice, and relevant laws and policies.”<sup>2</sup> This statement allows for the potential to include McKinney-Vento, but falls short in mandating that all obtaining a teaching licensure will be knowledgeable on the rights and services available to homeless youth and families.

Additionally, CAEP’s standards acknowledge that their “guiding document” (written by the National Research Council’s Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs in the United States) is one entitled *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy*.<sup>3</sup> Within this document the following passage again positions the issue of homeless students as tangential and on the periphery of poverty:

Some important implications of this commitment [to educate all students] are evident when one contemplates the numbers of children who are living in poverty, including some who are homeless, and the ways in which their circumstances may affect their education. High-poverty students are the most likely to be taught by teachers who are not well qualified, in part because high-poverty schools tend to see high teacher turnover...*Although some teacher preparation programs may focus attention on the needs of poor and homeless children, there are no systematically collected data on the subject.*<sup>4</sup> (emphasis ours)

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2. Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation, “Accreditation Standards,” accessed October 20, 2014, <http://caepnet.org/>.

3. Committee on the Study of Teacher Preparation Programs, National Research Council, *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy* (Washington D.C: National Academies Press, 2010).

4. *Preparing Teachers*, 34.

“No systematically collected data on the subject”—seems to be grossly inaccurate and misleading given the important legal battles that have been waged on behalf of homeless youth, and the countless school codes and policies now in place to ensure that homeless youth obtain access to school. Furthermore, the National Center for Homeless Education has had in place “data standards and indicators” for McKinney-Vento programs since 2000, and revised this document in 2006.<sup>5</sup>

Moreover, within *Preparing Teachers: Building Evidence for Sound Policy*, the legal history and protections that have occurred for the special education population are highlighted to ensure that educators are knowledgeable of and advocates for the rights of students with special needs: “For these students, 1975 was a landmark year: passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, which mandated that children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disturbed, or mentally retarded could no longer be excluded from neighborhood schools.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, the question arises, why do the legal rights of homeless families and youth not benefit from the same narrative that is afforded to the special education population within educational policy rhetoric and mandates?

At the state level, the Illinois Professional Teaching Standards (IPTS), reissued in 2013, make no mention of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, or homeless youth and families. However, the IPTS document references the following state and federal laws and school codes directly within the knowledge indicators regarding pre-service teacher education:

Understands the impact of cognitive, emotional, physical, and sensory disabilities on learning and communication pursuant to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (also referred to as “IDEA”) (20 USC 1400 et seq.), its implementing regulations (34 CFR 300; 2006), Article 14 of the School Code [105 ILCS 5/Art.14] and 23 Ill. Adm. Code 226 (Special Education);...when planning instruction, addresses goals and objectives contained in plans developed under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (29 USC 794), individualized education programs (IEP) (see 23 Ill. Adm. Code 226 (Special Education)) or individual family service plans (IFSP) (see 23 Ill. Adm. Code 226 and 34 CFR 300.24; 2006);...accurately interprets and clearly communicates aggregate student performance data to students, parents or guardians, colleagues, and the community in a manner that complies with the requirements of the Illinois School Student Records Act [105 ILCS 10], 23 Ill. Adm. Code 375 (Student Records), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 USC 1232g) and its implementing regulations (34 CFR 99; December 9, 2008);...understands emergency response procedures as required under the School Safety Drill Act [105 ILCS 128/1], including school safety and crisis intervention protocol, initial response actions (e.g., whether to stay in or evacuate a building), and first response to medical emergencies (e.g., first aid and life-saving techniques);...is aware of and complies with the mandatory reporter provisions of Section 4 of the Abused and Neglected Child Reporting Act [325 ILCS 5/4].<sup>7</sup>

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5. National Center for Homeless Education, *Data Standards and Indicators*, accessed October 20, 2014, [http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc\\_data.php](http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/sc_data.php).

6. *Preparing Teachers*, 36.

7. Illinois State Board of Education, *Illinois Professional Teaching Standards*, 2013, accessed October 20, 2014, [www.isbe.net/peac/pdf/IL\\_prof\\_teaching\\_stds.pdf](http://www.isbe.net/peac/pdf/IL_prof_teaching_stds.pdf).

We recognize the importance of these laws and policies, but wonder why the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act which stipulates in plain language, since 1987, the legal rights and affordances of homeless youth and families does not appear in such a compulsory document? Curiously, Illinois in many ways is the birth place of such legal precedence regarding homeless rights and advocacy.<sup>8</sup> If Illinois' professional teaching standards are void of this content, we urge readers in other states to determine if this content is also missing from their respective state's professional teaching standards.

### Cultivating Counter-Narratives for Justice

As concerned citizens and teacher educators, we acknowledge that there exists a sizeable gap between what has been written into law and what most understand regarding the law. This reality is unfortunately true for the professional preparation of teachers in regards to homeless populations. Consequently, this special theme issues seeks to close this knowledge gap and renegotiate the narrative that has been overly simplified, essentialized, and absent from the larger discourse regarding poverty and access to educational opportunities.

The articles in this special theme issue are interested in reframing the persistent dilemma of homelessness among families and youth in the United States. Each article presents a counter-narrative to the often articulated argument that homelessness is suffered by those who are personally at fault (unmotivated, lazy, etc.) for their circumstances. The aim of this special theme issue is to critically interrogate the persistent dilemma of homeless youth in schools, and renegotiate the narratives that have been claimed about homeless families such that we reconsider what can be done on the part of concerned parties. In particular, the authors are interested in how the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, a significant piece of civil rights legislation, has impacted the educational prospects of this rapidly growing population of marginalized youth.

We ask our readers to consider the following statistics:

- Estimates of the total number of homeless youth in the United States vary widely, with different studies reporting the population of homeless youth ages 12 to 24 between 1.6 million and 2.8 million. Of these youth, the *National Alliance to End Homelessness* estimates that more than 100,000 youth are homeless for an extended period of time, with the rest homeless for shorter periods. For youth ages 12 to 17, national studies estimate that there are between 1.6 million and 1.7 million who experience homelessness each year.<sup>9</sup>
- Chicago Public Schools identified a record 22,144 homeless students in the 2013-14 school year. This is an 18.6% increase from the entire prior school year. Of this, 98.2% were children of color and 20% have been diagnosed with disabilities or developmental delays. Homeless students included 2,508 unaccompanied youth, teens who were homeless and living without a parent or guardian.<sup>10</sup>

These realities should capture the attention of educational scholars, practitioners, policy makers,

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8. See Patricia Nix-Hodes and Laurene M. Heybach, "Removing Barriers: The Struggle to Ensure Educational Rights for Students Experiencing Homelessness," *Critical Questions in Education* 5, no. 3 (Fall 2014): 142-170.

9. Nico Sifra Quintana, Josh Rosenthal, and Jeff Krehely Center, *On the Streets: The Federal Response to Gay and Transgender Homeless Youth* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2010).

10. Chicago Coalition of the Homeless, *FAQ & Studies*, accessed October 22, 2014, <http://www.chicagohomeless.org/faq-studies/>.

and advocates, but something about the issue of unstable housing and abject poverty still allows for a subtle ignorance by many in the field of education. As a result, stereotypes run rampant and ill-informed assumptions about these families and youth dominate educator's consciousness in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Thus, this special theme issue encourages a much needed critical dialogue regarding housing and educational opportunities, as well as a discussion of the often omitted counter-narratives of homelessness that will aid academic discussions of equity and social justice.

Each article renegotiates the historical, sociological, pedagogical, and legal realities of homeless youth and families. Moreover, the backdrop of neoliberal educational reform, corporate logic, and growing dystopian educational landscape overlay the central concerns articulated in these articles.<sup>12</sup> For example, recently some cities have adopted policies that make homelessness a crime while at the same time acknowledging that affordable housing has all but evaporated.<sup>13</sup> The authors in this issue seek to understand such structural difficulties and logic that impede potential solutions to the continual problem of homelessness. Through broadly defined qualitative methodologies, critical policy inquiries, and legal studies, each author renegotiates the worn-out discussion surrounding homelessness and, more importantly, discusses what educators and advocates can do to ease the plight of this rapidly growing population within schools and social service agencies. We hope this special theme issues inspires a generation of educators to reframe their vocational calling first and foremost through the lens of advocacy rather than solely as "teachers of content."

Further, this special issue seeks to increase awareness among teacher educators, teacher education programs, colleges of education, and the bodies that govern them, and thereby encourage them to imbed the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act into their standards and requirements. Such measures would not only be good for students experiencing homelessness, but ultimately serve to strengthen the teaching profession in its ability to serve, support, and advocate for educational access for a significant and growing population of students. The contributors to this special issue understand the collective and sustained efforts necessary to seriously address the myriad of factors contributing to conditions of poverty and homelessness. We see education, advocacy, and justice as needed elements in addressing the school and societal inequities that serve as deterrents for homeless youth and families in reaching their fullest potential. We invite readers to join these efforts—talk about McKinney-Vento with your students, colleagues, friends, and family—increase awareness, ask critical questions regarding the implementation of McKinney-Vento in your respective institution, and take action!

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