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Exploring the Relationship between Educational Experience and Homelessness

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CAST 477 Research Project

**Exploring the Relationship Between Educational Experience and Youth
Homelessness**

By Sean Veacock

Abstract

This paper examines the educational backgrounds of eleven homeless youth in Peterborough. This examination seeks to determine if there is a correlation between level of education and youth homelessness. It also discusses the prevalence of learning disabilities among homeless youth and accessibility to testing for learning disabilities. Individual qualitative interviews were used as the method of inquiry.

The research determined that there is a correlation between educational background and youth homelessness. A significant number of the youth who were staying at the shelter shared similarly negative educational experiences. These experiences included teasing, harassment, conflict at home, lack of assistance with schoolwork, number of schools attended, and dropping out. The research also revealed that a large number of the youth had been previously tested for learning disabilities. However, their own understanding of their disability was questionable. This paper makes a number of recommendations to improve the educational opportunities for these youth.

Acknowledgements

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Purpose of this Project: Identifying the Problem

This project was initiated out of a desire to determine whether or not there is a correlation between youth homelessness and learning disabilities. It was suspected that many youth who experience homelessness have dropped out of school. What is more, it was suspected that a significant percentage of those who have dropped out of school also have an undiagnosed learning disability. The suspected connection between these factors can be explained as follows: If a youth has an undiagnosed learning disability then they are more likely to have inexplicable difficulties at school. These difficulties can lead to frustration that can culminate in the youth dropping out of school. After the youth has dropped out of school they may leave or be forced to leave their home. If the youth does not have another place to go to then they may become homeless. Once a youth becomes homeless it is difficult for them to gain employment or return to school. This may lead to a downward spiral that is both harmful to the youth and difficult to break out of.

For youth who have an undiagnosed learning disability and have dropped out of school returning to school in order to complete their education can be an unpleasant option. Even though the youth (or their parents) may suspect that their learning

difficulties are a result of a learning disability they cannot access the services that are available unless they have been diagnosed with a learning disability. In order to determine if an individual has a learning disability he/she must first be tested. In Ontario such testing is provided by the school board and available for free to youth who are enrolled in school. However, if a youth is not enrolled in school the school board will not pay for the testing. Under such circumstances the onus is upon the youth to cover this expense. This is very difficult, if not impossible, to do if the youth is homeless.

The Ontario Disability Services Program does provide testing for youth in such circumstances but the youth is required to supply a doctor's note of referral. It is also stipulated that the youth must have been a patient of the doctor's within the past three years. Not surprisingly there are youth who do not fulfill this criteria and, hence, are unable to access testing through ODSP.

Opportunities to receive testing for free occasionally arise. However, such opportunities are infrequent and typically conditional upon the individual's participation in research.

This project was proposed by Shari Davis at the Learning Disabilities Association of Peterborough (LDAP) and Chris MacDonald at the Youth Emergency Shelter to determine if there is a need among homeless youth for access to testing for learning disabilities. Jennifer Bowe from the Trent Centre for Community-Based Education facilitated the project. Professor Jim Struthers has supervised the project. This paper was written in order to document the results of the project thus far as well as to fulfill the written requirements for Trent University's Canadian Studies 477 course.

The project set out to investigate the following questions:

- 1) What is the level of education among homeless youth in Peterborough?
- 2) What academic difficulties have homeless youth encountered?
- 3) How many of the homeless youth are interested in continuing their education?
- 4) How many of the homeless youth have been tested for learning disabilities?
- 5) What can be done to improve this situation?

Definition of Terms

Learning Disability: A disorder that affects individuals of potentially average to above average intelligence by interfering with the central nervous system and its ability to process information. Learning disabilities affect the way in which an individual takes in, remembers, and understands information, as well as how an individual expresses that knowledge (from the Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario website).

Learning Difficulty: A term used to describe anyone who doesn't understand what they are being taught. It is not a formal term. It is a kinder term used to describe anyone who is having problems with their schoolwork (interview with Cathryn Montreuil).

Literature Review

About Interviewing: The primary method of investigation for this project was the interview. The following information was compiled in an effort to attain a better understanding of how to conduct face-to-face interviews.

At first blush the interview appears to be a very simple method of inquiry: ask questions, record answers. It seems so straightforward that one might think that it would take effort to get it wrong. And while it may be impossible to get an interview *wrong* it is much more difficult to get it *right*¹.

The purpose of the interview determines what type of interview method is used². Interviews can range from the rigid and formally structured interview to the seemingly informal and unstructured qualitative interview with any number of variations in between. Structured interviews³, such as the survey interview, offer respondents a selection of predetermined answers to choose from⁴ and, as a result, are useful methods of collecting quantitative data in order to test a hypothesis⁵. Qualitative interviews, such

¹ Richard M. Hessler, Social Research Methods (St. Paul, MN: West, 1992) 136.

² Earl Babbie, The Basics of Social Research (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999) 271.

³ Bruce A. Chadwick, Howard M. Bahr, and Stan L. Albrecht, Social Science Research Methods (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1984) 104; Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna, Experience, Research, and Social Change: Methods from the Margins (Toronto, Canada: Garamond Press, 1989) 74; and Tim May, Social Research: Issues, Methods, and Process (Buckingham, England; Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press, 1993) 92.

⁴ R. Guy Sedlack and Jay Stanley, Social Research: Theory and Methods (Boston, Mass: Allyn and Bacon, 1992) 223.

⁵ R. Guy Sedlack and Jay Stanley, Social Research: Theory and Methods 223.

as the interview guide interview⁶, are useful for exploring subjects that the interviewer knows little about⁷. Questions in the qualitative interview are non-directive in order to leave the respondent free to expand on the subject. This approach provides the researcher with greater insight to the respondent's perspective. Due to the exploratory purpose of the project the qualitative interview was used as the method of inquiry. What follows below are some of the problems and techniques that are germane to the qualitative interview.

It is important for the interviewer to research the subject matter beforehand. This knowledge will enable the interviewer to ask informed questions and may greatly facilitate the interview process.

After creating the list of questions the questions need to be tested. Feedback from the respondents can then be used to help the interviewer evaluate the appropriateness and vocabulary of the questions⁸ and edited accordingly. It has been suggested that the interviewer should be interviewed using their own questions so that they can experience the perspective of the respondent⁹. This technique may help the interviewer evaluate their questions as well as hone their interview skills.

Practicing the interview may also help the interviewer to prepare for the unexpected. Familiarizing oneself with the interview questions and the interview process is a definite way to prepare for the unexpected.

The interviewer should avoid asking double-barreled questions¹⁰ such as, "Do you like chocolate or vanilla ice cream?" Such questions may confuse the respondent. The answers to such questions may also cause confusion when the time arrives to analyze the results (e.g. "I like chocolate and vanilla ice cream.").

⁶ Guy R. Sedlack and Jay Stanley, Social Research: Theory and Methods. Boston, Mass: Allyn and Bacon, 1992) 223.

⁷Stephan L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul, Margaret D. LeCompte, Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999) 122.

⁸ Royce A. Singleton, Jr., and Bruce C. Straits, "Survey Interviewing," Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method, ed. Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2001) 63.

⁹ Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna, Experience, Research, and Social Change: Methods from the Margins 72.

¹⁰ Bruce A. Chadwick, Howard M. Bahr, and Stan L. Albrecht, Social Science Research Methods 117.

To avoid confusing the respondent questions should be kept short, simple, and specific¹¹. It is also a recommended practice to order the questions from simple to specific¹². The exception to this rule may be applied when the respondent indicates that they are unlikely to perform the entire interview¹³.

Rapport is essential to gaining the trust and cooperation of the respondent. The interviewer may increase the likelihood of establishing rapport by communicating a subtle enthusiasm about the topic of discussion¹⁴. However, rapport can be a double-edged sword: too much may bias the results, too little may truncate the interview¹⁵.

Factors such as the gender, ethnicity, and social status of the interviewer may cause the respondent to withhold information during the interview¹⁶. For this reason the interviewer should try to convey as neutral an appearance and demeanor as possible.

The interviewer should seek individuals who epitomize the analytic criteria that is being investigated¹⁷. One method of recruiting interview candidates is known as snowballing. This method relies on respondents to recruit other interview candidates. Key informants who possess familiarity with the subject matter and potential interview candidates may also be used to recruit respondents.

The location of the interview can affect the results. Ideally the interview should be conducted at a neutral location that is free from potential distractions¹⁸.

Making an audio-recording of the interview may alter the respondent's answers. There are two reasons for this behavior: first, respondents may be willing to talk on tape about the interviewer's concerns but not about their own personal issues; second, respondents may not want to talk on the record about issues that might be dangerous or

¹¹ Stephen L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul, Margaret D. LeCompte, Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999) 155-156.

¹² Earl Babbie, The Practice of Doing Social Research 270; Therese L. Baker, Doing Social Research 2nd Ed. (New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1994) 192; and Bruce A. Chadwick, Howard M. Bahr, and Stan L. Albrecht, Social Science Research Methods 117.

¹³ Stephen L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul, Margaret D. LeCompte, Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1999) 155-156.

¹⁴ Richard Hessler, Social Research Methods 156.

¹⁵ Tim May, Social Research: Issues, Methods, and Process 96.

¹⁶ R. Guy Sedlack and Jay Stanley, Social Research: Theory and Methods 226.

¹⁷ Carol A.B. Warren, "Qualitative Interviewing," Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method 87.

¹⁸ Stephen L. Schensul, Jean J. Schensul, Margaret D. LeCompte, Essential Ethnographic Methods: Observations, Interviews, and Questionnaires 134-135.

personally damaging¹⁹. For these reasons it has been suggested that the interviewer inform the respondent that the tape recorder can be turned off at any time so that he/she can speak off the record²⁰.

Before the interview begins it is important that the interviewer informs the respondent about who will have access to the interview results. The interviewer must also confirm that the respondent freely consents to have the interview recorded.

Informing the respondent about the purpose of the interview may help the respondent to understand the context of the questions²¹. Such an understanding may improve the usefulness of the respondent's answers. However, the interviewer should be aware that providing the respondent with too much information about the purpose of the interview may bias the results.

During the interview the interviewer should act as a, "neutral medium through which questions and answers are transmitted"²². The interviewer may facilitate the respondent's answers but he/she should never suggest words or answers²³. Nor should the interviewer agree or disagree with what the respondent says²⁴. He/she should merely acknowledge each statement. It is important that the interviewer knows their own personal beliefs but it is essential that they do not express them²⁵. This act rests on the interviewer's ability to maintain self-control.

Beyond asking questions the interviewer may probe the respondent for additional information. Simply asking, "How's that?" or "What exactly do you mean?" are just two examples of ways that an interviewer can probe for answers in a neutral manner. The probe should be kept simple so that it does not influence the respondent's reply.

Silence is another useful technique²⁶. It may cause the respondent to think that the interviewer is expecting them to say something²⁷. However, silence may also make the respondent feel uncomfortable and reticent rather than open and talkative.

¹⁹ Carol A.B. Warren, "Qualitative Interviewing," Handbook of Interview Research: Context and Method 92.

²⁰ Sandra Kirby and Kate McKenna, Experience, Research, and Social Change: Methods from the Margins 87

²¹ Bruce A. Chadwick, Howard M. Bahr, and Stan L. Albrecht, Social Science Research Methods 109.

²² Earl Babbie, The Basics of Social Research (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999) 243.

²³ Richard Hessler, Social Research Methods 157.

²⁴ Richard Hessler, Social Research Methods 156.

²⁵ Richard Hessler, Social Research Methods 157.

²⁶ R. Guy Sedlack and Jay Stanley, Social Research: Theory and Methods 230.

Should the respondent stray from the research topic the interviewer may try asking the respondent for more information on a more relevant or previously discussed subject²⁸. If this technique fails then the respondent may need to be reminded about the purpose of the interview.

If the respondent provides contradictory information the interviewer may need to politely confront them about it²⁹. This can be done by reminding the respondent about their earlier statement and then asking how it fits in with the contradiction.

For the sake of clarity the interviewer may summarize the respondent's answer to ensure that they understand what the respondent is saying³⁰. However, the interviewer must take care when summarizing not to put words in the respondent's mouth.

While the above information was compiled as an aide to conducting successful face-to-face interviews it is by no means comprehensive. Much remains to be learned from practical experience.

Methodology

Primary Data Collection

The first step in this project was the initial meeting with the sponsor of the project the director of the Peterborough branch of the Learning Disabilities Association Shari Davis. This was an informal meeting but it was an invaluable source of information. Shari expressed her concerns and suspicions and directed me to the relevant material. This meeting was also important to establishing how the projects would proceed.

The project was originally planned to involve myself and another student. My partner was interested in learning disabilities. She offered to research learning disabilities. I offered to research interview techniques. Prior to completing our respective research my partner accepted a job and had to withdraw from the course. After researching interview techniques I began to research learning disabilities.

²⁷ Richard Hessler, Social Research Methods 148-149.

²⁸ R. Guy Sedlack and Jay Stanley, Social Research: Theory and Methods 230.

²⁹ Richard Hessler, Social Research Methods 151.

³⁰ Richard Hessler, Social Research Methods 150.

The other sponsor of the project was the Youth Emergency Shelter. Unfortunately, Chris MacDonald, the person who had originally co-written the proposal with Shari Davis, was no longer working at the shelter. Her absence caused a delay in moving the project forward. There was some concern that the shelter might not want to participate. If this had been the case it would have made the project much more difficult because it would have been much more challenging to recruit homeless youth to be interviewed. I was also hoping that the shelter would provide me with the space to conduct the interviews. Finding a neutral public space outside of the shelter could also have posed a significant problem. Although it took some time to inform the new executive director about the project events proceeded rapidly after he signaled his commitment to the project.

Through my meetings with the LDAP and my research on learning disabilities I drafted a list of questions. This list was fairly lengthy and covered a broad range of topics. I was hoping to use the questions to distinguish the source of the youths' homelessness. For this reason I covered as many different aspects as I could think of. While the list of questions was fairly lengthy I planned to have the questions reviewed by the LDAP and YES as well as the ethics committee at Trent. I anticipated that there would be suggestions and revisions. I was not sure if I had asked the right questions, or if I had addressed all of the relevant areas, but I expected that I would be able to use the feedback from these groups to improve upon the questions. For the purpose of analysis I planned to use the same questions for every interview.

Shari Davis approved of almost all of the questions with the exception of a couple of questions regarding religious participation. Shari was very enthusiastic about the scope of the questions because they went beyond educational experience and would provide additional insight to the background of the youths. Shari felt that it was important to find out as much as possible about the youth because learning disabilities can manifest itself in social behavior. Knowing the background of each youth would also help to distinguish what problems were innate and what problems were environmental.

Next, I met with Catherine Pope from the YES. Catherine also reviewed the list of questions. There were a couple of questions regarding violence and crime that concerned her. Catherine wanted to ensure that the participants would have the option to

decline to answer any questions that they did not wish to answer. Since I had already intended to inform the participants of their right to leave questions unanswered I had no problem agreeing to this condition.

Catherine then offered me the assistance of a volunteer at the shelter to help facilitate the interview process and act as a support for the participants in the event that a problem arose. I welcomed this offer for two reasons. First, I was glad to have someone who was familiar with the residents who would have a greater opportunity to recruit participants (key informant). Second, I was concerned that the interviews might take a long time to conduct and it would be helpful to have someone conduct them on my behalf so that I could use the time on other areas of the project.

After reconsidering her first two suggestions Catherine offered me the assistance of Kevin St. Louis. Catherine felt that Kevin was well suited to the project and she was correct.

Before proceeding with the interviews it was necessary to submit the questions to the Trent Ethics Committee. The committee was very expeditious in reviewing my questions however they significantly pared down the list from ninety questions to thirty. The questions were limited to the subject of education. The committee had two concerns about the questions. First, they felt that the range of the questions was too broad and in some cases potentially too provocative. Second, they noted that it would take a considerable amount of time to answer all of questions. For this reason it would make the interview an unwieldy process. On both of these points I concur.

I met with Kevin and informed him about the project. At the same time I provided him with my paper on interview techniques for his perusal. Directly afterward I sat in on a meeting that he was having with some of the residents at the shelter. I was provided with the opportunity to inform the residents about the project and my plans to conduct interviews at the shelter. Their response left me doubtful about my potential success at this endeavor. I need not have worried. When I talked to Kevin the next day he had already set up seven interviews for the following week.

During the interim I practiced the interview. First Kevin and I interviewed each other. Then I interviewed friends and family. The interviews with the participants from the shelter went very well and very swiftly. This was entirely the result of Kevin's

efforts. He was an excellent key informant. Several of the residents did not show up for their scheduled interview. This would have posed a problem if Kevin had not been assisting me. When a resident did not appear for their interview Kevin would quickly find a replacement.

Kevin was also invaluable in his ability to make the residents feel comfortable with the interview process. He was the intermediary that brought me into their circle. Without his participation I would have remained an unfamiliar outsider. In his role as a witness and supportive assistant he intervened on occasion to help me through a few awkward situations. He also defused the participants' apprehensions.

I conducted ten of the interviews and Kevin conducted one. I ended up doing the majority of the interviews myself because they went so quickly. I had originally anticipated that the interviews would take up to two hours to complete but due to the fact that the list of questions had been significantly pared down none of the interviews lasted more than twenty minutes. It was at this time that I became grateful that my list had been truncated.

We conducted six interviews on the first day and five interviews the following evening. We could easily have done more interviews but we would have had to wait at least another week for our schedules to align. Although I would have liked to conduct more interviews I felt that due to time constraints it was best to end the interview process and move on to the research and analysis component. I was also uncertain how long it would take me to analyze each of the interviews and I was concerned that I may not have left myself enough time to do all that remained to be done.

After listening to some of the interview recordings I began to reconsider how I was going to analyze the information. I had originally expected that I could compile the relevant data by listening to the interviews and taking notes. However, when I listened back to the tapes I was daunted by the amount of information contained in each response. I was uncertain how I was going to sort the wheat from the chaff. I came to the conclusion that taking notes would be an inadequate method. I was also concerned that I might lose the information in the process: in the process of listening to the interview recordings one of the tapes had been tangled by my tape machine. Fortunately, I was able to salvage the recording.

For these reasons I decided to transcribe the interviews. Professor Struthers and Jennifer Bowe had warned me that transcribing was a lengthy process. I was not able to disprove them. Jennifer Bowe offered me the use of the TCCBE's transcription machine. This machine allows you to control the tape with the use of foot pedals. In this way your hands remain free to type or write. Using this machine would have considerably accelerated the transcription process. Unfortunately, I had used regular audiocassettes and the transcription machine used minicassettes. I rued my lack of foresight. If I were to do more interviews I would definitely plan on using minicassettes so that I could make use of the transcription machine.

After transcribing the interviews I compiled and categorized the participants' answers. In order to simplify the task of analyzing these results I identified each participant's answer by number. This small detail made it much easier to check the results and compare them with one and other. This was particularly useful when I was trying to determine the reasons behind a particular response.

During this period I continued my research on learning disabilities. I found the information on the causes and effects of learning disabilities to be rather straightforward. However, some of the theory surrounding the treatment of people with learning disabilities proved to be challenging due to its abstract nature. I had not anticipated that I would have this difficulty. If I were to continue with the project I would set aside more time to evaluate this research.

I also had a couple of follow up meetings with Shari Davis. Each of these meetings provided me with more first hand information and insight on the subject of disabilities. It was also at this time that Shari suggested other people for me to contact. One of these people was Catherine Montreuil, the Principal of Special Services with the Kawarth-Pineridge District School Board.

After several attempts I was able to contact Catherine. She was able to answer a number of questions that I had prepared regarding testing for learning disabilities. Catherine also suggested other people and groups that I might like to contact (e.g. Frontier College, Trent Literacy Association, psychologists for the school board). Due to the fact that Catherine had addressed most of my immediate concerns I did not follow up

on her suggestion. However, if I were to continue with this project I would definitely follow up on these contacts.

Reflections on Methodology

I have had many successes and made many mistakes in the course of conducting this project. As a result, I have learned many things from this experience. I will begin by discussing my errors in judgment.

The project did not always proceed smoothly. At times the project was delayed while I completed the necessary work, at other times it was delayed while I waited for the response of others. This latter delay was insidious.

I greatly underestimated the time that it would take to set up the interviews. I had originally intended to begin the interviews in January, at the beginning of the second semester. However, the interviews did not get underway until the last week of February. This was largely a result of my own underestimation of the amount of time that was needed to meet all of the conditions that were prerequisite to the interviews taking place. Although I had created a schedule for the project each stage took longer than I expected. This has had predictable consequences.

If I were to do the project again I would have made a greater effort to confirm YES' commitment to the project during first semester. I would have also prepared the interview questions in a more expeditious manner so that I could have consulted with YES, LDA, and the Ethics Committee earlier. These two changes would have enabled me to conduct the interviews at an earlier date and as a result I would have had more time to spend on interviews and analysis.

If I were to do the project again I might also have arranged to have more regular meetings with the sponsors. The meetings that I did have were infrequent and ad hoc. This suited my schedule but it also resulted in the fact that there was much information that I did not find out until the project was drawing to a conclusion. I would have really liked to pursue many of the contacts that were suggested to me near the end of the project. I think that the project would have benefited if meetings had been conducted on a monthly basis. To hold meetings more frequently might have been counterproductive because meetings can take up time that could be spent doing other things.

Having my partner withdraw from the project was a mixed blessing. It would have been great to have someone to share in the responsibilities of the project. Without a doubt the project would have been improved by her involvement. Her assistance was sorely missed when doing the analysis for the simple reason that it would have been tremendously helpful to have a second party check the results. However I do not think that the amount that we would have been able to accomplish would have been directly proportional to her involvement. This is due to the fact that when working with a partner a significant amount of time and energy goes into coordinating schedules and keeping each other informed.

It was also a psychological setback when my partner withdrew from the project. At that time I began to doubt if I would be able to do all of the work that needed to be done. I realize now that I need not have worried. But my time might have been better spent compiling a literature review on learning disabilities or youth homelessness instead of interview techniques. This is not to say that the knowledge that I acquired from my paper on interview techniques was not valuable (it gave me a whole new respect and appreciation for this method of inquiry) but it resulted in a trade off. I could have been more educated about the issues surrounding learning disabilities and homelessness when I conducted the interviews.

I am fairly pleased with how the interview process went. As noted above I do not think that I could have over prepared for the interviews. By practicing the interviews I was also able to refine the way that I asked a question. For example, I originally asked each participant, "What school subjects are or were you good at?" This question implies that they should have been good in at least one subject. After asking a few of the participants this question I realized that they might not have been good at any subjects. I then rephrased the question. I began to ask participants, "What school subjects are or were your best?" It was a small change but it made a big difference. The participants were not put in a position where they might feel defensive about the academic achievement.

After conducting a few interviews I also felt that some of the questions were redundant. Nonetheless, I kept them in the interview in order to remain consistent.

Like many skills interviewing improves with practice. I learned a great deal from transcribing the interviews. It provided an opportunity to listen to myself and analyze my technique. There were many times that I wished I had probed for more information. I missed several opportunities to clarify uncertainties. While I regret these mistakes I also realize that it is part of the learning experience.

It would be wonderful if the list of questions could be improved upon and the interview process continued. YES provides a unique opportunity to investigate the causes of youth homelessness. By not taking advantage of this opportunity the community is missing out on valuable information that could be used to alleviate the problem of youth homelessness.

This project also forced me to confront the limitations of time. As a novice at community research I had little understanding of how to proceed with the project in an efficient manner. Professor Struthers and Jennifer Bowe did provide me with guidance but advice is not equivalent to experience. I have greatly exceeded the time that was budgeted for the project and although I know that I have acquired a great deal of personal insight on learning disabilities, homeless youth and their educational experiences there is still so much more that I have had to leave unexplored. This is partly due to my limited abilities and my inexperience. It is also due to the potential scope of the project. There are many dimensions to youth homelessness and learning disabilities. Despite the significant number of hours that I spent on this project I have only scratched the surface. It is my sincere hope that someone else can pick up where I am leaving off.

Interview Results

Section A

1. Number of male participants: 6
Number of female participants: 5
2. Age of participants
Age 23: 4
Age 21: 3
Age 19: 1
Age 18: 2

Age 17: 1

Section B

3. Name of city or community where participant attended high school

Peterborough: 6

Cobourg: 3

Ottawa: 1

Hamilton: 1

New Brunswick: 1*

*note: this participant had also attended high school in Peterborough, as a result he is also included in the figure for Peterborough.

4. Number of high schools that each participant attended

One high school: 5

Two high schools: 2

Four high schools: 2

Five high schools: 1

Other: one participant did not go to high school but completed his education through correspondence.

5. Participants' high school enrollment

Number of participants currently enrolled in school: 2

Number of participants not enrolled in school: 9

6. Reason participant is no longer in school

Graduated from high school: 6

Dropped out of high school: 4

Note: one participant has graduated from high school but has returned in order to upgrade, another participant is currently enrolled in grade 11.

7. Last grade completed by participants who had not completed high school

Grade 10: 3

Grade 9: 1

Grade 8: 1

Note: one of these participants is currently enrolled in school and is planning to complete her high school education. The other four participants also expressed a desire to complete their high school education. Another participant who is currently enrolled in high school has already graduated. For this reason she was not included in these results.

8. Preference for attending school

Number of participants that liked going to school: 9

Number of participants that disliked going to school: 2

Note: included in the number of participants who liked going to school one liked school but disliked going to class, another participant said that she liked to learn but she did not like Catholic school, and the participant who completed his education through correspondence inexplicably answered that he liked going to school.

9. What made participants happy when they were at school

Socializing: 8

Learning: 4

Gym: 1

Art: 1

Performing on Stage: 1

Nothing: 1

Note: participants could identify more than one thing that made them happy when they were at school.

10. What participants liked about school

Socializing: 5

Learning: 4

Independent Studies: 1

Horticulture: 1

Science: 1

Nothing: 1

Note: participants could identify more than one reason why they liked school. Also, one participant was not asked this question.

11. What participants disliked about school

Social Problems: 4
School/Class too crowded: 4
Lack of in-class assistance: 2
Academic difficulties: 1
Too much schoolwork: 1
School day started too early: 1
Streaming: 1
Catholicism: 1
Everything: 1
Nothing: 1

Note: participants could identify more than one thing that made them happy at school.

12. Participants' comfort level at school

Comfortable at school: 4
Comfortable at school but not in class: 2
Uncomfortable at school due to other students: 3
Uncomfortable at school: 1

Note: the participant who completed his education through correspondence was not asked this question.

13. School subjects in which participants performed their best

Art: 6
Computer Science: 4
English: 3
Math: 3
History: 3
Science: 2
Gym: 1
Horticulture: 1

Note: participants could identify more than one subject as their 'best'.

14. School subjects in which participants performed poorly

Math: 8
English: 7

Geography: 3

Science: 2

History: 2

French: 1

Spelling: 1

Note: participants could identify more than one subject that was not their 'best'.

15. Number of participants who had access to help with their high school homework: 7

Number of participants who did not have someone to help with their homework: 3

Note: one participant did not do homework.

16. Who helped participants with their homework

Family: 3

Friends: 2

Teachers: 2

No one: 3

Note: one participant did not do homework.

17. Problems that affected participants' academic performance in high school.

Family Matters: 4

Other Students: 4

Academic Difficulties: 3

Teachers: 3

Difficulty Concentrating: 2

Lack of in-class assistance: 1

Learning Disability: 1

Interpersonal Skills: 1

Medical Problems: 1

Catholic school system: 1

Note: participants were permitted to cite more than one problem that affected their academic performance in high school.

Section C

18. Participants' attitude toward other students

a) Number of participants who liked their fellow students: 7

b) Number of participants who disliked their fellow students: 3

Note: one participant claimed that he did not interact with other students

c) Number of participants who had problems with other students: 7

d) Number of participants who did not have problems with other students: 2

Note: two of the participants did not answer this question.

Section D

19. Participants' attitude toward their teachers

a) Number of participants who said that their teachers treated students fairly: 2

b) Number of participants who said that their teachers did not treat students fairly: 3

c) Number of participants who said that the level of fairness depended on the teacher:
5

Note: one participant did not answer this question

e) Number of participants who said that they liked the majority of their teachers: 4

f) Number of participants who said that they disliked the majority of their teachers: 5

g) Number of participants who said that it depended on the teacher: 1

Note: one participant did not answer this question.

h) Number of participants who said that the majority of their teachers cared about them: 5

j) Number of participants who said that the majority of their teachers did not care about them: 3

j) Number of participants who said that level of caring varied between teachers: 5

k) Number of participants who said that they had problems with their teachers: 6

l) Number of participants who said that they did not have problems with their teachers: 5

Section E

20. Number of participants who have been tested for a learning disability: 6

Number of participants who have not been tested for a learning disability: 5

21. Results for participants who have been tested for a learning disability

a) One participant was told that she had Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and as a result has been taking Ritalin since she was six.

b) One participant was told that she had a slow learning disability and Attention Deficit Disorder.

c) One participant was told that he had dyslexia but he has never used this information.

d) One participant was told that she had problems with math (which she had already surmised).

e) One participant was told that his academic difficulties were a result of his troubled home life – he was placed in a comprehensive learning class where he performed very well.

f) One participant was told that his academic difficulties were a result of his above average intelligence. He later dropped out of high school.

22. Number of participants who would consider being tested for a learning disability: 7

Number of participants who would consider being tested for a learning disability but only if it was necessary: 2

Note: two of the participants did not answer this question. Also, two of the participants who had already been tested were willing to be tested again in order to confirm the results.

23. Reasons cited for wanting, or not wanting, to be tested for a learning disability

Number of participants who wanted to be tested in order to increase their self-awareness and/or self-confidence: 6

Number of participants who did not answer this question: 4

Note: one participant who had been tested for a learning disability said that he would be willing to be tested again but only if it was necessary. He did not feel that testing would change his situation.

Section F

24. Participants' educational aspirations

Number of participants who consider education important to their future: 10

Number of participants who do not consider education important to their future: 1

Number of participants who would like to go to college: 6

Number of participants who do not want to go to college: 2

Number of participants who are uncertain as to whether they would like to go to college: 2

Note: one participant had already attended a semester of college (after which she had withdrawn from the program).

Number of participants who would like to go to university: 1

Number of participants who do not want to go to university: 8

Number of participants who are uncertain as to whether they would like to go to university: 1

Note: one participant had already completed two years of university (after which she withdrew from the program).

25. What participants would need in order to complete their education

Money: 2

Educational assistance: 2

Conducive situation: 1

Five years of high school or General Educational Certificate: 1

Three years of high school: 1

Two years of high school: 1

Note: participants could state more than one 'need'. Also, five of the participants did not answer this question.

Discussion of Results

The participants were older than I expected them to be. However, when I consider the fact that most youths that I know did not leave home until they were nineteen or twenty it made sense that the majority of the participants were nineteen or older. At this age there is the societal expectation for individuals to leave home and

support themselves. The age of the participants may also have reflected the fact that six of the interviews were conducted on a week day morning when residents who were enrolled in school would have been in school at the time.

When considering the high school experiences of the participants one can see a possible correlation between the number of high schools that a participant attended and the likelihood that they have graduated. It appears that the more high schools that a youth attends the more likely they are to drop out of school. Of the six participants that graduated from high school five of them had attended only one school. Conversely, of the four participants who had dropped out of school three had attended two or more high schools. The one participant who had attended only one high school and had dropped out had only completed grade nine.

There also appears to be a correlation between having someone to help with homework and the likelihood of graduating. Of the three participants that did not have anyone to help with their homework two dropped out of school. Of the other two participants who dropped out of school one mentioned that he received help from one of his teachers but this does not appear to have been a regular occurrence. The other participant who dropped out of school did receive help from his stepmother but one must wonder about the dynamics of the situation in light of the fact that he also noted that she was abusive.

It does not appear that any participant's opinion of their teacher had a determining effect on their likelihood of graduating. Four of the six participants who said that they had problems with their teachers still graduated and three of the five who said that they did not like the majority of their teachers also graduated. As well the three participants who said that teachers did not treat students fairly graduated as did the three participants who felt that their teachers did not care about them.

The three most significant factors that appear to have contributed to individual difficulties at school were problems at home, problems with other students, or problems with school work. Of the four participants who dropped out of school three cited family problems as the source of their difficulties. Three of the four (although not the same three) claimed that problems with other students had contributed to their academic difficulties. Lack of in-class assistance was also cited as a contributing factor by three of

the four participants who dropped out of school (again, not the same three participants). Lack of in-class assistance was mentioned as a source of considerable frustration by six of the participants.

The majority of the participants liked going to school. Many of them cited the social aspect of school. They enjoyed seeing their friends and the support that their friends gave them. For a few, school was a welcome change to an unpleasant home life. Several of the participants mentioned that they liked having the opportunity to learn. Along with the social aspect several participants mentioned their favorite class as another reason for liking school.

Many of the participants identified Art as their best subject. Conversely, a significant majority of the participants claimed Math or English was their weakest subject. The transcripts do not provide much insight to these results other than revealing claims that the participants had difficulty understanding these subjects. It was interesting to note that although a number of participants who performed well in Math and poorly in English (or vice versa) four of the participants cited both subjects as among their weakest.

Looking at Section C it is apparent that only two of the participants did not mention having any problems with other students. The transcripts support this result. All of the participants, with the exception of the two just mentioned, had difficulties with other students in one way or another. The real difference seems to be in the degree of difficulty. Participants who made general comments about their problems with other students were more likely to have graduated than the participants who noted that they had significant difficulties with other students. The more significant difficulties involved teasing and fighting.

Considering the fact that less than five percent of the students currently enrolled in the Kawartha-Pineridge School District have a learning disability (Catherine Montreuil) it is apparent that a disproportionately high number of the participants have been tested for a learning disability. Of the six participants that have been tested three have dropped out of school. What the participants have to say about this testing is difficult to interpret.

It is easier to understand that many of the participants would be willing to be tested for a learning disability. While some of their willingness stems from a natural curiosity about their intellectual abilities some of the participants would like to be tested in the hope of finding the source of their academic difficulties. Two of the participants who had been tested and later dropped out of school wanted to be tested again in order to confirm the results of the initial tests.

The results also revealed that almost all of the participants agreed that formal education was important to their future. Seven of the participants would like to pursue post-secondary education. However, after considering what they will need in order to complete their education it becomes apparent that this will not be easy for any of participants should they choose to carry on with their studies. Those who have dropped out of school have the largest obstacle to overcome because they each have between two to four years of high school to complete. Their burden is increased by the fact that they must support themselves at the same time. Self-reliance will be a challenge for all of the participants if they are going to complete their education. Formal education may be important to their future but at present it is does not top their list of priorities. Food, shelter, and employment are their primary concerns.

The results in themselves only reveal general details about the participants' high school experiences. Arranging the interview as I have done further fragments these details so that it becomes impossible for the reader to gain an insight into the experiences of individual participants. One could not know from reading the results listed above that participant #5 attended at least five different high schools because he was bounced around from one foster home to another. Nor could anyone deduce from these results that this soft-spoken young man who radiates good will put a knife to the throat of one of his classmates after being continually harassed. Reading the results by themselves one would never know that participant #8 had such a negative school experience that she does not appear to have any wish to complete her education. Nor would anyone know that participant #2 had someone waiting in the hall with her three-week old daughter. This woman was the one participant who had attended university. Her future plans involved applying her university credits to college so that she could more quickly graduate with a diploma in social services. Sitting in the interview room at the shelter the realization of

her plan seemed remote although not impossible. These are the details that numbers cannot quantify. Yet these details are equally significant to the results listed above.

As I went through the interviews with the participants I began to appreciate how far each of them were from completing their education. When I compare all of the resources that I use to complete my education to the resources that they have...I wonder why should anyone be surprised that they are not pursuing their education? They do not have permanent shelter nor the resources to support themselves. I admired the determination of the two residents who were currently enrolled in school but when I considered their situation I became doubtful of their possible success. This is not to suggest that they should give up, or that I am trying to discourage their efforts. On the contrary, I am suggesting that more needs to be done for them.

After the interviews I mentioned some of my conclusions to Shari Davis. She pointed out that there are resources to help these youths get back into education. Apparently the problem is raising awareness. These youth need to be made aware of the resources that are available to them. Shari said that the LDA has been to the shelter on numerous occasions to inform the residents but due to the transient nature of the population it is difficult to maintain this awareness. I suggested that the LDAP place posters and pamphlets at the shelter as a way of advertising their services. Shari agreed with suggestion. She also mentioned that the shelter might be getting an educational coordinator who will be able to promote the LDAP's services at the shelter.

On the issue of learning disabilities there can be little doubt that many of the participants would have liked to have access to testing. What the results do not reveal was the level of their desire for testing. Some did not believe that testing was relevant to them, others were simply curious about measuring their intellectual abilities, but there were a few for whom testing was important and their desire was palpable. Their desire stemmed from an uncertainty with the source of their academic difficulties. They wanted to continue their education but they needed to know why learning had been so difficult for them in the past before they proceeded.

Conclusion

The participants almost unanimously agreed on the importance of education to their future yet only a couple of them were currently attending school. It is an oversimplification to interpret their current situation as a result of the fact that they are not in school but when talking with them one begins to appreciate how their past experiences and their present situation make a return to school a monumental task. Convincing homeless youth of the importance of completing their education is not a difficult task. However, actually making this happen is another matter. It is difficult for a youth to think about education when they do not have permanent shelter or unyielding support. Nonetheless, there are resources available to these youth. The LDAP offers personal tutors who can help individuals who are having difficulty with their schoolwork, they also offer assistance to individual's who need help creating an educational road map to complete their education. Raising awareness of these resources should be a primary task for the shelter and the LDAP and YES.

Access to testing for learning disabilities is another matter. Many of the participants claimed to have a learning disability but their explanation of their disability was difficult to interpret. It is unfortunate that these youth cannot be tested if they are not enrolled in school. Testing is costly but it would provide individuals with invaluable information about themselves. It is absurd that the LDAP does not have the resources to test individuals whom they suspect have a learning disability. It is also perplexing why the LDAP does not have the authority to refer individuals to be tested by their local school board. Although school boards in Ontario do not currently receive funding for youth who are not enrolled in school the provincial government may be able to save money in the long run by allocating funds for testing youth who are not enrolled in school. One would suspect that a youth who has not completed their education might use more social services in the long run than a youth who has completed their education and is able to seek gainful employment.

Recommendations

1. LDAP should put posters and pamphlets outlining their services at the shelter and in all school guidance offices in the district. The LDAP provides many necessary and useful services. Youth need to be made aware of their availability. It is difficult to access a resource when one does not know that it exists.
2. The LDAP should have the resources to pay to test youth who are no longer enrolled in school but whom the LDAP suspects has a learning disability.
3. If the LDAP is not provided with the resources to test youth for learning disabilities then they should be permitted to refer youth to be tested by the school board. The school board should receive funding from the provincial government in order to provide for this additional testing.
4. The interview process that began here should be continued. These youth provide invaluable first-hand accounts of what constitutes youth homelessness. This information can only be put to use if the process is continued.

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