A Critical Study of Unaccompanied Homeless Youth in a Local Housing Program

Michael J. Warren

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A CRITICAL STUDY OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH IN A LOCAL HOUSING PROGRAM

A Dissertation
Submitted to the School of Education

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

By
Michael J. Warren

May 2022
A CRITICAL STUDY OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH IN A LOCAL HOUSING PROGRAM

By

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Approved February 24, 2022

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ABSTRACT

A CRITICAL STUDY OF UNACCOMPANIED HOMELESS YOUTH IN A LOCAL HOUSING PROGRAM

By
Michael J. Warren
May 2022

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Darius Prier

Housing programs available to youth experiencing homelessness offer varying types of supports and initiatives. However, few programs are created by and with the perspectives of these youth. This qualitative study examines the experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) while living in a housing program, identifies specific needs of UHY, and aims to learn of the political role the community and educational institutions play in empowering youth experiencing homelessness.

Implications highlight how critical pedagogy can be used by educational leaders to empower student voice and aims to shift student learning from a “banking” model to democratic participation. This research will advance implications for educational leaders and policymakers across PK-16, to work towards equitable and just policies and practices for students/youths experiencing homelessness.
Finally, implications from this study will make distinct connections between the lived experiences of youth experiencing homelessness to inform community resources. These resources include housing models and educational institutions. These institutions argue that community organizations and schools can work together to best meet the needs of youth.
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to all the young men and women who have spent time in the foster care system and have felt unsupported. To those who have experienced trauma caused by physical abuse, verbal abuse, sexual abuse, or mental abuse, this dissertation is dedicated to you. For every foster kid who was told they would never amount to anything or felt as if they were only viewed as a paycheck for their caregivers, this is dedicated to you. As someone who has sat in your shoes, I commit this work to you. I hope to inspire you and remind you that you are more than your foster care status, or your homeless status. You can do whatever you want to do.

To my biological mother, who I believed truly loved me despite her challenges, I dedicate this dissertation to you, also. After you passed away, I was determined to live the life that I knew you always wanted me to. Though you never had the opportunity to see me graduate, my educational pursuit has been because of you.

To Mr. Henry L. Biggs, I dedicate this dissertation to you as well. As a young, black boy at Rogers CAPA Middle School, faced with many hardships, you never allowed me to make excuses. You encouraged me to live the life I wanted to live for myself. You encouraged me, supported me, and pushed me to change for the better.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Growing up in the foster care system and not being connected to just one family, it was hard knowing who I would consider my family. After my failed adoption, there were moments where I absolutely felt alone. Fortunately, I shifted my understanding of what family was. I often share that family is a choice, loving people is a choice. In this section, I choose to acknowledge those who chose to love me even when there was nothing for them to gain.

First and foremost, I acknowledge my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! When I had nothing and no one to depend on, my faith kept me grounded. Romans 8:28 says “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to his purpose.” Most gracious God, thank you for coming into my life at a young age and always reminding me that you are ever present.

To my friends who have become family, thank you. Many of you have provided me with a place to stay, gave me money when I had none, donated clothes, fed me when I was hungry, thank you all for showing me that Matthew 25:35-36 type of love, friendship, and stewardship. Keenan, who has been my longest friend of over 20+ years, I love you brother! To Saja and Qwaya, who were my rocks during my first few years of college, I am here because of you. To Carvis and the Fisher family, thank you for always imparting words of wisdom and constantly keeping me grounded in my faith. To Virgil, you are appreciated in ways you will never understand. Thank you for the long talks and many prayers. Your faith has been inspiring. To Trevon, you have been such a blessing to me, and I have been grateful for the brotherhood that we have. There have been many more friends who have become family to me over the years, I love you all.
To my biological siblings, Ken’Netha & Tyke, through the good, bad, and the ugly, you both have inspired me in ways you will never know. I pray that this accomplishment, which you have supported me on the entire way, is proof that you can do anything you put your mind to. You both are blessings to me and to this world, and I cannot wait to see how you continue to leave your mark.

To my wife, Kayla, I love you. Kayla, you epitomize what I meant when I said family is a choice, loving people is a choice. Though I had not much to give you financially and materialistically, you chose to love me. You chose to see me for who I would become. You did not run when you found out I was homeless and battled health issues. Instead, you have loved me, supported me, and encouraged me to be the best version of me possible. Thank you for your patience throughout this entire process. It has not been easy, but you have made it all worthwhile.

To Dr. Connie Moss, when I was trying to justify spending the thousands of dollars on this program, you immediately assured me there was nothing like it and it would be the best investment into my future; you were so right. Thank you for your commitment to social justice and for the work you have done to ensure we as educational leaders are always reflecting and working to improve our practice. You always said that with all I had been through, completing my dissertation would be the easiest thing I have ever done. Well, it was certainly not easy, but thanks for reminding me it was possible.

To the Educational Leadership faculty members, I cannot think of a better group of individuals to help lead and guide me the last 3 years. You have made this entire process unforgettable, and for that, I thank you.
To my dissertation committee members, Dra. Liliana Castrellón & Dr. Anthony Kane, thank you both for challenging me and motivating me to accomplish what seemed like an impossible task. You have both encouraged me, inspired me, pushed me, and provided me with many spaces to vent over the course of this journey. I could not have thought of a better group of young scholars to join me on this journey!

Finally, to Dr. Darius Prier, my dissertation chair, no amount of thanks can adequately show my gratitude to you and your family for the work you have done to push me to become the critical thinker that I am. Coming into this program, seeing a black male professor, that was extremely motivational and inspiring to me. Then to learn you were a man of faith, a family man, one who is dedicated to serving people; I knew I found a great professor, but more importantly, a great mentor for life. I look forward to the future, and I am proud to know that my doctoral journey was possible because of you. Thank you for being an example of what a black, male, believer in academia can look like.

To conclude, I am grateful to those who have been a major support to me over the last few years. Malcolm X had it right when he said, “When I is replaced with we, even illness becomes wellness.” I have been immensely blessed by the supports of my family, friends, and professors over these last few years. I hope to continue making you all proud. In the words of the African term Ubuntu, “I am because we are,” and because we are, I am!
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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Problem

Rationale for Study

Introduction

In 2011, as my high school graduation was quickly approaching, securing permanent housing and a long-term family placement was a top priority for me. While many of my peers were anticipating events such as prom and other senior activities, I was preparing for a court hearing that would officially declare me a ward of the court. All my life I had been a dependent of a system that was meant to unify me with my family. However, after a failed adoption, one that I was in for 10 years, I was going back into a system where I had previously spent the first 5 years of my life in and out of six different foster homes. Unfortunately, things did not work out the way they were intended to, and I ended up back in the foster care system as an 18-year-old. After five different temporary homes in the span of three years (eleven total placements in my lifetime), none leading to a permanent family solution, I was not sure of what would come next.

In 2014, at the age of 20 and weeks before my 21st birthday, I had a meeting that involved a few Children, Youth and Family Services (CYFS) caseworkers, my attorney, a representative from a contracted agency of CYFS and another member from the Department of Human services (DHS) of Western Pennsylvania. This meeting was unique as it was the close out meeting that DHS employees have with youth aging out of the foster care system. At almost 21 years of age, I was on the verge of being homeless.

During the meeting in 2014, I remember one of the caseworkers in the room presenting me with a list of homeless shelters and programs that could assist me with housing. This was a complete blow to my ego. On one hand, there was nothing I did to deserve this “low” status. On the other hand, I wondered what type of support I would need to accomplish my goals while
presented with yet another overwhelming obstacle. Each year, 20,000 to 25,000 youth age out of foster care (some of whom are working towards a college degree) (Rashid, 2004). Most of these youth become homeless, unemployed, or jailed within 2 to 4 years after leaving the system. Only 10% graduate from college (Huang et al., 2019; Kinarsky, 2017). Here I am, a struggling sophomore music education student, now contemplating dropping out of school since the chances of me graduating college have become less likely.

I feel like no one sees me, no one recognizes the struggles I face daily. I feel like I am by myself. As a college student, I am concerned with where the money is going to come from to fund my next semester, but now I have the barrier of not knowing where I am going to live. To put it in perspective, my classmates are preparing for junior recitals and student teaching, and I am trying to figure out whether or not housing insecurities are going to cause me to drop out of school for the third time. To top it all off, none of my professors understand what I am going through.

Prior to 2014, I knew little about what it meant to be homeless. I believed that to be homeless, one would live in their car, or under a bridge. I also assumed that homeless people got there on their own. I thought that to be homeless, one must have done something that led them there. While this could be the case for some, it was not the case for me, yet here I was. The McKinney-Vento Act, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2, recognizes youth homelessness as youth (under 26) who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence, which includes youths who are sharing housing with someone due to loss of housing or other hardships (Sosa et al., 2015). Couch surfing, a term I had learned during this grim time, was something I did for the next year as I searched for a more permanent solution.
Thanks to my time in the system, I was able to build many relationships with people who would later direct me to resources that would help me towards overcoming my homelessness. Some of the people connected me to scholarships which help college appear to be more affordable, while some of the relationships built connected me to government benefits. My relationship with workers from the Department of Human Services (DHS) was crucial as that is the connection that directed me to the housing agency in Western Pennsylvania. This program was for youth experiencing homelessness; however, it was only available to youth who had a referral from another DHS program.

As a ward of the court, I was able to get my case worker from DHS to refer me since I had been couch-surfing with different friends at the time. Disclaimer, when I registered, couch surfing qualified me as homeless. By the time I completed the program in 2017, the United States Department of Housing and Urban Redevelopment (HUD) had modified their definition of homelessness, and that would later have an impact on those who qualified for homeless youth services. Fortunately, a new building was being built around the corner from the university I attended. The YourWay Youth program (pseudonym), a youth program within Initiative Based Housing (pseudonym), had received funding to complete a housing project for at risk homeless youth between the ages of 18-24. Graduating college at this point was becoming more promising for me.

Upon entering the YourWay Youth program, I only cared about housing. The programing component did not matter as much as I just wanted a place to call home after living with different people over the course of a year. When I first joined the YourWay program, I was assigned a case manager. I was responsible for checking in with my case manager weekly and reviewing the rules and procedures for the participants of this program. One thing that stood out to me was the
two-year maximum time limit to be in the program, or the maximum age of 24 before transitioning out of the program. A few questions came to mind:

- What am I supposed to accomplish in these two years?
- How will I know that this program was a success for me?
- Will I be able to secure housing at the end of the two years?

The more I explored these questions, two more pressing questions struck me:

- Who is responsible for creating and implementing a curriculum when serving this demographic of youth?
- How much say do students have in what they are taught?

In chapter two, I will explore different housing models including transitional living programs, permanent supportive housing programs, and rapid rehousing programs (Curry & Petering, 2017; Garcia & Kim, 2020; Holtschneider, 2016; Lenz-Rashid, 2018; Rashid, 2004). Each housing model offers a unique program and has varying time lengths for program eligibility. As I dive into the research that explores the types of housing programs, and after having experience in a housing program, I look to make the connection between the research and my own experiences.

Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspectives of Youth Homelessness

The McKinney-Vento Act

Homelessness has been a national issue for the past thirty-three years, which is why the McKinney-Vento Act was created (Nunez & Collignon, 1997; Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017; Rafferty, 1995; Whalen, 2016). The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was the first federal attempt to address homelessness. This federal legislation included many supports for students. For example, these supports include responding to barriers to school access, the authorization of
the Education of Homeless Children and Youth Program (EHCY), and mandated state coordinators of homelessness (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017). Since the development of the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act in 1987, the policy has undergone a host of reauthorizations. President Ronald Reagan’s urgent approval of this groundbreaking legislation was to make sure there was a crucial focus and intentional assistance for students and families experiencing homelessness (Biggar, 2001). The belief was that all homeless students have a right to a free, appropriate education.

**Local Perspective on Youth Homelessness**

YourWay Youth program represents one of many local homeless organizations that serve youth in Western Pennsylvania. This one program has branched out to offer different services to serve more youth experiencing homelessness. Currently, YourWay offers:

- Rapid Re-Housing program which serves youth ages 18-24 by providing a stable housing situation that sets them up to secure and maintain permanent housing

- Permanent Supportive Housing program which eliminates the burden of finding a place to live and allows them to work on their employment and independence skills

- Foundation for Independence program which is primarily for foster youth over the age of 18 who are without housing, have graduated from high school and are currently enrolled in secondary education

- The Pathway to Independence Program that fosters independence skills and sets youth up to reach long-term goals, including permanent housing (*MyPlace Youth Programs*).

One of the barriers that have an impact on youth homelessness is the working definition of homelessness, as the program’s definition of homelessness will impact who qualifies for homeless services. For example, the program that I graduated from in 2017 was a two-year
program for unaccompanied homeless youth who were without permanent housing. This included youth who were living with friends. Upon completing the program, I was informed that due to the policy and HUD’s working definition of homelessness (which does not consider staying with friends a qualifier for homelessness) I would not have qualified for the program.

Another barrier that has a negative impact on youth homelessness is the lack of services available outside of housing. These services can include medical services (Medicaid), food services (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), and/or transportation services (affordable access to public transportation or a personal vehicle). Due to varying reasons, these resources are not readily available for youth experiencing housing insecurities or are limited. Due to my time in the foster care system, I was fortunate to already have health insurance. For youth who were not previously in the child welfare system, it was highly likely that they would not have had access to health insurance the moment they became homeless.

Additionally, food services were hard to come by. After receiving a $2 raise when I switched jobs, I lost my food stipend due to my pay increase. I went from making approximately $960 a month (before taxes) and receiving $190 in food stamps to making $1,200 a month and no longer qualifying for SNAP. Though my program only required thirty percent of my income to be used for rent, when the other expenses were factored in, it became a challenge to feed myself daily. These barriers are based on my experiences, though a more complete list of barriers will be identified in chapter 2. Lack of resources available is connected to the lack of a support system youth experiencing homelessness have.

Finally, the lack of a support system proved to be an additional barrier. I had no family support since my biological mother had passed away, my adopted mom left, and my siblings were not in a position to support me. My friends had great intentions, but no one was in a
position to offer me the type of support that I needed to overcome homelessness or to successfully complete my education.

**Leadership Perspective on the Problem**

**Perspective as a Former Homeless Youth:**

My time at YourWay presented a host of challenges between myself and the leadership at times. I was certain that all I needed from the YourWay program was affordable housing. Fortunately, for me, the program was designed to provide more than just housing to youth experiencing homelessness. The program staff members were persistent in reminding youth that their participation in program activities was crucial in successfully completing this program. Some of the youth participating in the program were homeless after losing a parent, some were in the program after being kicked out for their sexual orientation, and some were in the program as an alternative to group homes. It was clear we all had our reasons for being placed in this program, but what was not as clear was the type of impact the program would have on us as individuals.

Regardless of what led me to being homeless, my needs were much different than the needs of my housed peers. More specifically, my needs as a collegiate student were significantly different than those of my non-housing insecure peers who were attending the University. My classmates did not understand my housing situation and many of them could not sympathize or empathize what I was going through as a youth experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, the professors offered no accommodations, nor did they ever ask what I needed to make my educational experience more equitable and just.

I recall a time where I had finally secured a temporary housing solution during my junior year of college. It was as if I had accomplished a major goal until I received my student teaching
placement for the following year. Prior to this placement, I spoke to my professors about my housing insecurities. I shared with them that I did not have money for tuition, nor did I have money available for food at times. By offering this perspective, I had hoped they would be understanding of my request to place me on a bus line. Youth in homelessness have major transportation barriers both in the prek-12 sector and at the collegiate level. Unfortunately, the response I received was that students are not assigned placements based on transportation.

To my professors, I was not seen as a homeless youth who needed equitable accommodations. I was seen as a college student who was being expected to find transportation to my student teaching placement. It was as if I had no say. Although I needed to be seen as different, they wanted to treat me as if I was the same as my housed peers. This section offered my perspective as a former youth experiencing homelessness. The next section states my positionality during my time as a teacher.

**Perspective as a Teacher**

Part of my pursuit to become an educator has everything to do with my previous experiences as a youth experiencing homelessness. It was clear to me there were flaws in “the system” that prevented educators (PreK-12 or collegiate) from leading with compassion or understanding towards youth experiencing homelessness. This is largely because teachers are unaware of what students experiencing homelessness need, but they also are unaware of available supports and interventions positioned to help youth experiencing homelessness. These supports include knowledge of the McKinney-Vento Act, transportation accommodations for students who have been displaced due to homelessness, free lunch, and tutoring services to help improve the academic performance of youth in homelessness.
Teachers’ lack of understanding with respect to the needs of youth experiencing homelessness is extremely detrimental towards the way they support these youth (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2011a; Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008; Swick, 1995). Michelle Jones (pseudonym) was a 12th grade student at Washington High School (pseudonym). In the middle of a conversation between Michelle and a grade level teacher, I overheard her share that she had been couch surfing for months due to an altercation with her mother. She began to express her interest in college, but it seemed like an extremely unrealistic goal considering she was without permanent housing, and she could barely afford school lunch. Lastly, she shared how no one knew what she was going through, and it did not appear as if anyone (in leadership) could help her.

Though this conversation was not meant for me, it allowed me to see a challenge when it comes to teachers and their ability to support youth experiencing homelessness by identifying or recommending resources. This entire exchange was troubling to me for several reasons. For starters, it was clear that my colleagues at Washington High School were not only unable to identify the need Michelle had, but they were not able to identify the specific supports available to her per the policy in place that was intended to help students experiencing homelessness.

At one point, one adult who works with Michelle daily, and is tasked with assisting and supporting her, did the opposite. The counselor told her that she would not succeed in college and refused to assist her in applying for a 4-year university. Though it was early fall, she was told that Community College was the only option for her should she choose to go to college. She was victimized because of her homeless status and was reminded of the barriers that she faced. Instead of counseling and connecting her to resources and supports, this educational leader ignored her. No one provided her with interventions that would improve her grades and help her
get to school regularly and on time. This experience woke me up and reminded me why it is important for educators to be aware of the signs for students experiencing homelessness. More importantly, it is the role of teachers to be a reliable support system for youth in homelessness.

It is these kinds of circumstances that are not in pre-service programs. Furthermore, an understanding of homeless policy is not outlined in teacher prep programs. I was aware of her challenges and was able to identify possible solutions for her only because of my experience as a former homeless youth. What I learned back then was teachers, without the right training, will continue to allow homeless youth to slip through the cracks.

**Perspective as an Administrator**

It is not surprising that not all teachers understand policy in place to help support students experiencing homelessness. However, it is surprising and disappointing that district administrators continue to not offer professional development for teachers to identify the signs of students dealing with homelessness, nor do they make it clear what services are available for students experiencing homelessness. What is additionally troubling is when administrators enforce policy in place to support students experiencing homelessness, and do not center the decisions around the best interest of the students. The policies enforced end up benefiting the school/district and the student becomes severely inconvenienced.

The McKinney-Vento Act has been reauthorized many times to offer solutions that will best support students experiencing homelessness. One of the many reauthorizations includes providing transportation to students who have been displaced from their initial residence within a school district. This part of the policy centered around transportation is meant to offer stability and consistency for the students in the event they are facing housing insecurities.
As an administrator in a large urban school district, there are many times where particularly challenging situations are presented and we rely on current policies and procedures to help guide our decision making. After a mother of two called to inform us she and her children had been staying in a hotel due to a house fire, our team knew immediately that we were going to have to work to provide supports for this family. We were able to connect the mom with a local nonprofit that provided some essentials (food, clothes, water, etc.) while they lived in a hotel until an alternative solution could be worked out. The mother eventually moved into a different living space (a garage converted into a studio apartment), and she reviewed those details with the school.

Following the mom’s completion of paperwork confirming her homeless status, I was able to talk with the mom about where to place her children for the remainder of the school year. The mom shared that she preferred her students remain in their current school. Based on the McKinney Vento policy, this request was well within the parent’s rights; the dilemma, however, was with the commute. The family lived approximately 40 minutes away from the school by vehicle.

Now, typically the district would try to provide the students access to a school bus or van that they would use until the end of the year. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, transportation options were limited, and the district did not have a way to conveniently provide transportation to and from school. After talking with district officials, the solution was to provide bus tickets for the students. To clarify, tickets would be provided to a couple of siblings (five and six years old) to ride public transportation to school. The total commute would be 40 minutes via a car. This commute on a public bus becomes 1 hour and 30 minutes one way.
The district was not wrong in providing this option, however, who does this option benefit most? This is part of the problem with the grey area in the wording of this policy (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017). As an administrator, I was disturbed at the solution we were going with because it was not best-case scenario for the family. Even though the mom requested her children be kept at their home school, and even though we honored her request, this solution would put a strain on the students’ chances of arriving to school regularly. To no surprise, the students’ attendance suffered the remainder of the school year as they were unable to make that transportation commitment.

My perspective as a teacher and administrator is a result of my professional study of homeless policy and a result of my firsthand experiences as a former homeless youth. My lived experiences as a homeless youth have forced me to always look at practices and how they impact homeless youth. My experiences with homelessness have helped me question and critique some of the inequitable practices witnessed in schools, even those that comply with federal policy. Being in a leadership role provides me with an opportunity to identify contradictions within the policy and then I can use my experiences and the experiences of other youth to help make effective changes that benefit the youth impacted by homelessness.

In addition to policy, my perspective allows me to use my first-hand account of what youth in homelessness need to create professional development opportunities to address those needs. Furthermore, my perspective allows me to implement programming in schools that address those needs. Students come into schools feeling isolated, unheard, unsupported, and victimized for their homelessness. Youth homelessness is a traumatic experience. My position as an educational leader allows me to help youth in homelessness confront that trauma.
The stories shared above set the stage for the study to come. The three different anecdotes in this section highlight why understanding the voices of unaccompanied youth is significant. Though these are my stories, these stories are common for other youth experiencing homelessness. The main takeaway from this section is the power of one’s voice. The ability to empower those impacted by homelessness, the willingness to hear the testimony of those impacted by homelessness (the unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, the teacher, and the administrator responsible for implementing policy to serve unaccomplished youth experiencing homelessness) and the courage to use those stories to create change to better serve those youth.

**Youth Voice on Homelessness**

**Homeless Youth Alumni Council**

In the Spring of 2021, current and former members of the YourWay Homeless Youth program were invited by the program director and the director of Initiative Based Housing Inc. to form what is now known as the YourWay Homeless Youth Program Alumni Council. The alumni council was created to gather insight from YourWay youth as the organization worked to create a new initiative meant to directly impact current and former youth in the program. The primary goal of this group is to identify needs of youth experiencing homelessness, and to work with stakeholders (the youth) to create programming that will address the needs and wants of youth who come through this program. When the first meeting occurred, I had a chance to meet 2 current residents and 2 former residents, all who had diverse encounters with the YourWay youth program. After sharing with the group that Initiative Based Housing would be providing funding to create an Alumni Center, they shared that their hope was to allow the details of the center to be completely guided by student voice.
When the program coordinator opened the floor to discuss ideas about what students wanted this center to look like, one youth shared that they wanted to be sure that this center did not model a group home. Now, I have never experienced a group home, but in this moment, I understood the benefit to having various voices who have diverse backgrounds contributing to this council.

This alumni council was created to not just have youth tell stakeholders what they felt would make a good community center for youth in homelessness. This alumni council was created by leaders to see that youth in homelessness are viewed as stakeholders themselves, and as a way to empower the youth. This allowed for youth to share their experiences within the different group homes, the YourWay program, and other housing-based initiatives. The adults leading this initiative approached the youth with love, patience, hope and faith that together they could create an outlet for youth in homelessness. By doing this, the youth were not only empowered, but they became critically aware of their homelessness by reflecting on their current status and previous experiences. From there, they developed political agency which leads to critical action.

This action includes speaking up for where and how the federal money is used to create a space for them and not a space that makes them feel guilty for being homeless. This action includes showing up to board meetings to discuss some of the practice’s programs have implemented that are oppressive and dehumanizing. This council is the epitome of engaging in dialogue with a marginalized population to impact their critical consciousness and allow them to create change while pursuing liberation.
Youth Voice

What if youth participation and action were understood as essential to forging a just, equitable, and diverse society? How might policy makers and educator’s partner with young people to radicalize schooling? In an effort to engage the opening questions, we begin with the premise that young people are active contributing members of society. (Cerecer et al., 2013, p. 216)

Young people are active contributing members of society. Cerecer et al. (2013) poses the following question: “Who better to understand today’s educational conditions than young people who daily engage with the teaching and learning in public schools?” (Cerecer et al., 2013, p. 217) This very question demonstrates the importance of student voice. The fact is the young people must be key stakeholders when it comes to anything being implemented that may directly impact them. This is the case for policy that is created, programs and initiatives being implemented, and anything else that has to do with improvement for the youth. Centering youth voice to inform the practices of intervention for youth experiencing homelessness is crucial if schools, homeless shelters, and other community organizations are going to offer programs that are relevant and impactful for the youth these groups intend to serve.

Hearing from these youth will allow for school leaders and other community leaders to learn what is and is not working. They get to hear a first-hand account of how their intent and impact align (or do not align), and they get to create modifications that are relevant to their primary stakeholders. Additionally, creating opportunities for these young people to impact change within the organization is empowering and is a wonderful way to build capacity and self-efficacy within a group of young people who are marginalized.
Some of the gaps observed when it comes to youth voice is the unwillingness of community partners and educational leaders to hear from the voices of the youth they serve. It comes off as if the youth do not know what they need, especially marginalized youth. Some leaders have a savior complex, one that suggests only they know how to best serve youth in need. This is the opposite of empowering, and it is also what makes youth feel as if their voice does not matter. Additionally, it is what forces organizations to operate the same way which produces the same unsuccessful results. By being intentional about youth voice and the role youth voice plays in organizational change, there is a chance more programming can have a greater impact because it will be created based on identified needs of the students they serve.

**Problem of Practice**

**Problem Statement**

Those tasked with serving unaccompanied homeless youth often lack the understanding of what these students are experiencing, both in school and out of school, which makes it hard to implement programming that addresses their specific needs. For example, homeless liaisons are unaware of their duties as liaisons (Havlik et al., 2020), and teachers often hold deficit ideologies of towards students experiencing homelessness (Brown, 2012; Swick, 1995). Due to the ever-changing definition of homelessness, the number of youths who qualify for services varies depending on the agency and how homelessness is defined (Cackley & Office, 2010).

Given the limited research on housing programs, communities are unable to successfully replicate a housing model that best meets the needs of unaccompanied homeless youth. Finally, the voices of the youth impacted by homelessness are not often considered in policymaking or leadership decision-making (Mohan & Shields, 2014). Youth experiencing homelessness must become key contributors in their success. By utilizing a critical pedagogy approach, the youth begin to
question the status quo, they challenge the status quo, and they seek change that allows them to overcome the oppressive nature of homelessness.

**Significance of the Problem**

Implementation of the McKinney Vento Act of 1987 was meant to provide relief to homelessness by providing funding to states and schools (Losinski et al., 2013). Additionally, with the Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act (HEARTH Act) of 2009 expanding the age funding and services are available to unaccompanied homeless youth (Abdul Rahman et al., 2015), the opportunities to witness “success” stories of unaccompanied homeless youth should be abundant. Yet, of America’s 568,000 people experiencing homelessness on any given night, 35,000 are unaccompanied youth and 89% are between the ages 18-24 (Henry et al., 2020). Without hearing from the students experiencing homelessness, needs are not met which can lead to homelessness in adulthood ((USICH), 2015).

Dismissing the value of youth and their potential impact on policies, programs, and practices lead to missed opportunities for youth accomplishments, blaming the youth for challenges they meet, and continues the discomfort youth and adults feel when they are in each other’s company. Together, these mistakes continue a cycle of youth oppression that has severe consequences for RHY… When youth are included in programming and research, one not only realizes improved benefits with projects, but there are latent outcomes that benefit the youth as much, if not more, than any panned intervention (Schweitzer, 2011, p. 184).

Research has shown when youth participate in programming and research, they benefit from improved programming and intervention (Schweitzer, 2011). The significance of this study is to provide a platform for youth experiencing homelessness to share their stories, offer their perspectives of their homeless experiences and provide an opportunity learn from these
youth and provide implications for community organizations, policy makers, and educational leaders.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study will highlight youth voice as a key part of the research to determine the success of a current housing program and to develop comprehension for what unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness need to successfully overcome barriers. Using a critical pedagogical lens, this research will examine the lived experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) living in a housing program. Findings will identify ways schools, post-secondary institutions, and nonprofit/community organizations can use the experiences of these youth to offer resources and a curriculum (both in school and out of school) that will empower and uplift UHY.

**Central Research Questions**

1. What are the lived experiences of unaccompanied youth in homelessness enrolled in the YourWay Homelessness Youth Program?

2. What are the institutional constraints/barriers that position youth in homelessness?

3. What is the political role of the community/school in relation to facilitating empowerment?
Definitions

The condition of **homelessness** refers to a person who lacks permanent housing of their own. This includes people who are doubled up with friends.

**Unaccompanied Homeless Youth:** Youth between ages 18-24 experiencing homelessness and are not in the physical custody of a parent. This includes youth who have been kicked out, youth who have been abandoned, or youth who have run away from home.

**Couch Surfing:** A term used to reference an individual whose nighttime routine involves sleeping at different homes nightly.

**Failed Adoption:** For this research, failed adoption refers to an adoption that ends due to court intervention after two parties (the family and the adopted child) part ways.

**McKinney-Vento Act:** A policy created in 1987 to combat homelessness in America.

**HEARTH Act:** The Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing Act was the 2009 reauthorization of the McKinney Vento Act that is known for consolidating grants, increasing resources, and changing the definition of homelessness.

**Implementation:** This is the process of executing and fulfilling a plan and having a scale to measure the effectiveness of the implementation.

**MVAIS:** The McKinney-Vento Act Implementation Scale is an instrument used to measure school personnel’s perception of how well they implement the MVA by using 3 main domains: preparation, accessibility, and collaboration.

**Rapid Rehousing:** This is a short-term housing intervention designed to provide immediate housing for people experiencing homelessness.

**Permanent Supportive Housing:** This is a long-term housing intervention that offers support services to help those struggling with homelessness.
**Transitional Living Programs**: These programs have a temporary living intervention designed to provide skills intended to help people experiencing homelessness adapt to a more permanent living situation by offering skills that foster independence.

**Critical Pedagogy**: This is a theoretical framework designed to empower populations in marginalized circumstances by challenging dominant culture by questioning the “why” and “how” it becomes the norm.

**Barriers**: These are institutional obstacles that prevent change.

**Teacher**: This is a person who guides the stewardship of learning in educational settings and contexts.

**Educational Leader**: This term typically refers to a school administrator, program director or any other adult tasked with leading a group of youth.

**Stakeholder**: Person(s) who possess a specific interest or concern in the success of a school or community.

**Pedagogy**: This is a particular method and execution of providing instruction.

**Curriculum**: Information taught to a group of learners intended to increase their proficiency in said subject.

**Summary**

My motivation behind this research is connected to my lived experience as a former homeless youth. Having gone through the YourWay youth program, I understand what the program offers. This study, by amplifying student voice, will identify ways that program staff (and other stakeholders) can create and implement curriculum (in school and out of school) that is empowering, and allows for reflection and political action that helps unaccompanied homeless youth overcome homelessness. In short, though my situation is special, it should not be an
anomaly. The goal is to identify holes or confirm strategies that are working and lead to less unaccompanied homeless youth impacted by such oppressive practices.

Chapter 2 will define homelessness, introduce the McKinney-Vento Act while providing an overview of the authorizations that have come from it. This chapter will also identify the method for collecting data to report youths experiencing homelessness. In addition, chapter 2 will also examine the roles of school personnel, provide perspectives on the impact of teacher’s and pre-service teacher’s perspective of homelessness and homeless youth, and explore the diverse types of housing models.
Chapter 2: Homelessness Review

Review of Literature

This chapter investigates the definition of homelessness, the McKinney-Vento Act and how it is implemented, the stakeholders responsible for implementing this act, and the barriers of the policy. Once an understanding has been established, this chapter will begin to examine perceptions of youth experiencing homelessness by their teachers, pre-service teachers and others who work with them, the responsibility of administrators serving students experiencing homelessness, and the role of the community.

Furthermore, this chapter will identify homeless programs across the United States and successful ways to evaluate said programs all while sharing strategies that have worked when addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness. To conclude, this chapter will identify barriers of homelessness, explore the negative impact homelessness has on students’ educational well-being, as well as their physical and mental well-being.

Brief Overview of Homelessness in America

What is Homelessness?

School systems aim to provide an equitable and just education. However, with the rising numbers of American’s experiencing homelessness each year, this becomes more of a challenge for school districts throughout the country due to the tight job market, the lack of affordable homes and low income (Abdul Rahman et al., 2015). In 1987, the McKinney Act (now the McKinney-Vento Act (MVA)) was created to combat the national homeless crisis (Nunez & Collignon, 1997; Rafferty, 1995). Abdul et al., (2015) suggests that homeless youth are the fastest growing and the most vulnerable segment of the U.S. population. According to the MVA,
homelessness is defined as children and youth who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. This definition includes:

- Youth who share housing with others.
- Youth whose nighttime residence is not designed for regular accommodations for human beings.
- Youth who are living in cars, parks, public spaces.
- Migratory youth.

This definition is based on the National Center for Homeless Education (National Center for Homeless Education at, 2018a). The Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has a similar definition which feature key components; however, HUD excludes children and youths who are doubled up (meaning they are living with a family member or a friend). This could mean they are temporarily living on the couch or in a spare room. (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017). Though HUD’s definition is guided by the MVA, the overall definition is based off literal homelessness, those who will imminently lose their residence, unaccompanied youths who meet the MVA and additional criteria and individuals fleeing or attempting to flee domestic violence with no residence (National Center for Homeless Education at, 2013).

One of the primary changes in the 2015 reauthorizations was to remove children and youths awaiting foster care from those who were qualified as homeless (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017). Additional updates to the definition from Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA) include children and youths who are living in emergency or transitional shelters or abandoned in hospitals. As this work progresses forward, government agencies must establish commonality in how homelessness is defined. This will encourage a more collaborative approach to serving those experiencing homelessness (Cackley & Office, 2010). The following section will further explain
all the additional reauthorizations that the MVA has undergone since the original inception of the implementation back in 1987.

**Reauthorization Timeline**

The government instituted a federal grant program in 1987, challenging state departments to establish an office of the coordinator of Education of Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY). The coordinator is to be responsible for collecting data on homelessness and creating an action plan to assist these students. The collected data would then be reported to the U.S. Department of Education. Another key point to this policy was that it required states to revise laws and eliminate residency requirements as an obstacle to enrolling in school. Students were not to be prevented to enroll in school based on their place of residence. (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017)

In 1990, under the George Bush administration, the first set of amendments were accepted. These amendments helped strengthen the rights of homeless students. One example of this was the original act focused just on removing residency requirements. The amendment, however, helped address the students’ access to services once they are enrolled in school. (Biggar, 2001)

Under President Clinton, the 1994 reauthorizations included removing the 50% local grant requirement for primary education activities and added pre-school students in the definition of free education and adds pre-school coordinator requirements. This reauthorization also required school districts to abide by parent’s request to enroll children experiencing homeless in a particular school and required liaisons to provide head start for student’s experiencing homelessness (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017).

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) & Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) included many additional amendments and improvements to the policy. These amendments
included providing additional clarification on the definition of homelessness (including youth waiting for foster care placement or being abandoned in a hospital), mandating liaisons in every district of those receiving federal funding and finally, required transportation to and from school of origin, if requested by the parent (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006). Other changes included amending the definition of school of origin to include neighborhood feeder schools and preschools. This new reauthorization removed awaiting foster care from the definition of homelessness (Pavlakis & Duffield, 2017).

Reporting Procedures

Implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act presents many major challenges, one of which is centered around not having an accurate process to identify students who are homeless and in need of McKinney-Vento Act services (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006). This could be since though implementation of the McKinney Vento Act is to be carried out by all districts, even if they do not receive funding (Abdul Rahman et al., 2015), not all participate, nor are there evaluation processes from the Department of Education to hold districts accountable.

The bottom line is that the government does not guarantee education for homeless children, rather, it offers a nominal formula grant to states that choose to apply for it. Therefore, the act is not fully equitable because states vary in their willingness to apply for the money and their enactment of specified provisions. (Biggar, 2001, p. 960)

Whether or not states choose to receive funding, the government must provide criteria for local and state educational institutions when collecting data for homelessness. For those school districts who do receive funding, they must:

1. Collect and report data on students experiencing homelessness every 2 years to the Department of Education (DOE) (Secretary of Education)
2. Develop a plan that
   a. Authorizes personnel to make school placement determination in best interests of child.
   b. Implements procedures to resolve school placement disputes.
   c. Develops and implements programs for school personnel.
   d. Allows students to participate in programs (before and after school).
   e. Removes Barriers.
      i. Enrollment delays
      ii. Transportation
   f. Demonstrates SEA and LEA policies that remove barriers and ensures homeless students are not stigmatized.

3. Have a coordinator who facilitates communication between SEA, social service agencies and other service providers who impact homeless children (Biggar, 2001).

   The National Center for Homeless Education released a guide to collecting data as a resource for those responsible for collecting and reporting data at the local and state level. This resource provides a flow chart directing all personnel of their responsibility, what type of data should be collected, timeline for when the data should be reported, and consequences associated with failure to report (Endres, 2019).
Homelessness in Education

Role of the Administrator

A lot of the research identifies the role of liaisons (Wilkins et al., 2016), social workers (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006) and counselors (Sosa et al., 2015), yet other researchers discuss the missing piece of literature: identifying the significant role of the administrators (superintendents and principals) (Von Dohlen et al., 2019). A few students in the master’s program noted that their school districts had not previously provided professional development about student’s experiencing homelessness and poverty. Additional research exposed that many school leaders had little to no knowledge of basic homeless concepts, like the McKinney-Vento Act, the definition of homeless, procedures in place to identify homeless students, or the resources available for families and youth experiencing homelessness.

Being aware of these basic concepts is a small part of the administrator’s role. Administrators are responsible for knowing and understanding other roles of those who work in direct relation with students experiencing homelessness. More specifically, it is the administrator’s job to know the role of the homeless liaison, as they will work to not only hire the liaison, but they will also work closely with this person in executing tasks assigned to the liaison (National Center for Homeless Education at, 2018b)

Role of the Liaison

Homeless liaisons are required by all school districts, as part of the McKinney Vento Act. According to Miller, liaisons are a crucial factor in the success of homeless students as they facilitate information sessions to educate students and families of the services offered. Liaisons monitor transportation issues and work with parents to help their navigation of the school system.
As important as the liaison is (Havlik et al., 2020), often one has not been identified or the ones who are identified do not understand their role.

Multiple sources cite Thompson and Davis’ research from 2003 which highlights that many homeless liaisons from Illinois were not aware of their appointment as homeless liaison. They also had no awareness of the McKinney-Vento Act (Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni & Israel, 2006; Wilkins et al., 2016). A study that included homeless liaisons from Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee showed that of these 3 states and the 369 eligible participants, only 32% responded to the McKinney Vento-Act Implementation Scale (MVAIS). A few key findings from this research were:

- Those assigned to the role of homeless liaison are typically responsible for other tasks outside of the typical liaison description.
- Liaisons who had more one on one interactions with children and youth experiencing homelessness had higher implementation scores.
- Though most of the participants suggested their implementation was above average, the research suggested a different reality.
- Further study is needed to understand the relationship between liaisons and their roles in the school community (Wilkins et al., 2016).

Havlik et al. (2020) suggests that by assigning additional roles to the homeless liaison, it can hinder them from providing their undivided attention to meeting the needs of the students who are experiencing homelessness.

The National Center for Homeless Education policy brief provides multiple resources confirming and defining the role of the liaison per the McKinney-Vento Act. The responsibilities outlined include:
• identifying students who are experiencing homelessness,

• making sure confirmed students (and unaccompanied youth) are enrolled in school and have full access to an equal opportunity to succeed in the district,

• providing professional learning opportunities for school personnel, and

• educating families on all services provided through the McKinney-Vento Act (National Center for Homeless Education at, 2018c)

**Teacher & Pre-Service Teachers**

How teachers develop their perceptions of children who are homeless is a major part of this process as it influences their interactions with children and their families. Therefore, it is imperative for teachers to continually reflect on and transform their perceptions of children and families who are homeless (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2011a, p. 207).

Teachers tend to see homelessness as weakness and not as social injustice (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). These false assumptions and perceptions of homelessness were like the normalized assumptions found in Swick’s previous study, which it is suggested to have been present since the 60’s & 70’s (Swick, 1995). Some of the perceptions come from negative experiences and stereotypes (i.e., homeless parents are lazy and do not care about their child’s academic status).

Powers-Costello and Swick both suggest that as teachers build a stronger foundational understanding of homelessness, and as they learn more about their student's experiencing homelessness, their perceptions begin to change (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2011b). Swick’s study in 1995 showed how working together (the department of education, local school district, and the university) can provide impactful and meaningful professional learning opportunities to
shift the way teachers see students experiencing homelessness (Swick, 1995) which will allow them to better serve the students who are homeless (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2011a).

It is equally as important for pre-service teachers to address their bias and negative perceptions of youth experiencing homelessness. While teachers can gain insight through professional development opportunities, pre-service teachers rely on universities to provide curriculum that addresses this. Likewise, opportunities within their program allow them to work closely with students and families experiencing homelessness (Kwartler, 1993).

Community engaged learning opportunities, or service-learning opportunities are crucial in providing the necessary experience for pre-service teachers to connect with youth experiencing homelessness (Kim, 2013). These experiences can help alter college students’ pre-existing beliefs of homelessness (Wright et al., 2019), but that is not always the case. Kim highlights that some of these service-learning opportunities only confirm the biases exhibited by pre-service teachers, which can be negative, which counter the inclusive purpose of connecting pre-service teachers with homeless youth (Kim, 2013).

The next section will begin to explore the diverse types of housing programs, the length of stay in each program, and some of the programming associated within each model. School leaders, homeless liaisons, and other educational leader’s awareness of the housing models in their school community can help them know what it is their students are being taught outside of school. This is important considering 11% of the 35,000 unaccompanied homeless youth are school aged (under 18-years-old) (Henry et al., 2020). This is an opportunity for the school personnel to bridge the gap between in school education and the learning that occurs when unaccompanied homeless youth leave the building. It also provides school personnel and community leaders a chance to work together to build relationships with their students.
**Homeless Programs & Initiatives**

Interventions and support programs that serve as ‘safe havens’ for youth and young adults experiencing homelessness often have many different models with varying names and funding sources. Though there are multiple independent approaches to these program models, there is little to no research on which program is the most effective. The models that have been implemented have similar goals: to offer stable housing, community resources, and supports to steer youth and young adults experiencing homelessness to independence and housing security (Curry et al., 2020).

In short, regardless of the foundation behind these varying approaches, the common goal of housing programs is to help individuals become self-sufficient (Pierce et al., 2018). These contrasting models present a major challenge when agreeing upon a consensus of the amount of supports and interventions needed. Furthermore, the amount of funding provided conflicts with the services programs can provide to youth experiencing homelessness (Semborski et al., 2020).

One provider from a study conducted by Semborski et al says:

> Two years is not necessarily enough time to get people at a situation to where they can live without subsidy, and often people who are coming out of transitional housing, there’s not a lot of resources for them to access. It’s very hard to get these outcomes and to do these things when the system doesn’t necessarily seem to be built to support people who are not at their most vulnerable point in their life, but still need some help to get over the hump (Semborski et al., 2020, p. 9).

One program model, Transitional Living Programs (also known as TLPs), houses students for a limited amount of time (12-14 months) and can lead to a Permanent Supportive Housing program (PSH). Rapid Rehousing Programs (RRH), however, has a limited timeline agreed upon
by case-managers and clients according to the needs of the youth experiencing homelessness (Semborski et al., 2020). In the next few sections of this chapter, the housing models (TLP, PSH & RRH) will be further explored.

**Transitional Living Programs**

Transitional living programs were inaugurated as part of the 1988 *Reconnecting Homeless Youth Act (RHYA)* reauthorization, which has been reauthorized 5 times since the policies origination (Holtschneider, 2016). Funding for the 200+ TLPs that exist across the country is part of the RHYA. These programs provide housing supports and services that promote independent living skills such as: financial planning, interpersonal skills training, educational goal planning and physical and mental health care services (Curry & Petering, 2017). Semborski’s study suggests that though 12-14 months of service is common, the most ideal TLPs are 24 months (about 2 years) long and then can transition the youths to a more permanent program through the PHS.

Moreover, providers from this study ventilated the idea that many of the services offered at the beginning of the program tend to decrease over time based on the needs of the youth in the program (Semborski et al., 2020). Federally funded transitional living programs are required to offer safe and stable housing through direct service or referral (Prock & Kennedy, 2017). Nevertheless, providers are not certain of how much support their programs are to offer due to the lack of clarity on how much support is enough (Semborski et al., 2020). This is also due to the lack of empirical evidence confirming what services and practices are most effective for these types of programs (Curry et al., 2020).

A frequent theme for TLPs is that providers and researchers would begin to evaluate and report long-term outcomes of the homeless youth who participate in the program, based on the
services received. Based on a study out of the Bay Area in California, a TLP known as the Real Alternatives for Adolescents (RAFA) housing program has shown effectiveness with long term outcomes (Lenz-Rashid, 2018).

Building relationships was a key factor in a 2016 study that highlighted a sense of family emerged during homeless youths’ time during a TLP. The youth found family amongst others within the program, especially if they did not have family support coming into the program. Thanks to their shared experiences of other youth in the program, empathy was another common theme that helped promote relationship building and unlikely friendships for the participants. Healthy relationships with the staff were also important. One participant said “… she also kept pushing me as well, because she knew that I had a lot of potential…” (Holtschneider, 2016, p. 210).

Though relationship building is an important concept with all stakeholders in the TLP, not all relationships were positive (Holtschneider, 2016). Some program case managers and directors were flexible with enforcing rules as they wanted effective engagement with the students. Conversely, some were strict, and their enforcement of procedures made the students feel like criminals. Some of the studies from Curry’s meta-synthesis suggested that the goals of independence were contradicted by how the staff members policed the youth (Curry et al., 2020).

Permanent Supportive Housing Programs

Permanent supportive housing has been a successful intervention to help persons with mental illness, alcohol addictions and general medical conditions. These individuals experience a more stable housing situation. Similarly, to other initiatives, not much research is available to determine the effectiveness of this model when supporting young adult homeless youth (ages 18-24) (Todd P. Gilmer, 2016). Additionally, the amount of youths to gain access to this type of
A participant from a study conducted by Semborski et al. (2020) speaks of how agencies that worked with adults had to learn different techniques and concepts as well as gain background information of what works best for young adults. One debate argues, unlike adults, youth are not interesting in permanent housing. Since youths are still developing mentally and the short-term structure offers clients gradual exposure to interventions, this would allow youth to accomplish short term goals before moving on to more independence and responsibility long term (Pierce et al., 2018). Modifications are for PSH interventions to best serve youth experiencing homelessness, but the most effective interventions are still undetermined, and more research is required (Todd P. Gilmer, 2016).

**Rapid Rehousing Programs & Housing First Model**

In 2009, HUD funded The Rapid Rehousing Program as part of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, following the Great Recession (Garcia & Kim, 2020). Like the previous two housing models (TLP & PSH), Rapid Rehousing (RRH) was built from trial and error after adapting other existing models (Semborski et al., 2020). The RRH model was created to serve as a rental program that allows youth and young adults to stay for a limited amount of time while paying 30% of their income for rent (as is customary for HUD programs) (Garcia & Kim, 2020).
Unlike the other housing models, Rapid Re-Housing focuses on helping youths secure housing after completing the program and provides services that are specific to the needs of the youth, based on youth input. One provider says:

   We do it a little different ... we work with them on when they want to exit, not just offering an amount [of financial support]. We did that previously in transitional housing programs. We said you'd get six months of assistance and people would take that six months, but when we started ... asking what they think they need, you know maybe it's just security deposit and first month’s rent… they kind of hold their own accountability.  
   (Semborski et al., 2020, p. 6)

Pierce et al. (2018) introduces two theories that housing interventions are grounded in. One of the theories is centered around incentives. When housing is used as an incentive, youths (or other populations affected by homelessness) impacted by homelessness will be more motivated to be self-sufficient if their housing insecurities are addressed. Their second theory is based off Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs theory. Abraham Maslow’s theory, which has been applied to empirical research in varying fields, has very rarely been connected to the lack of basic housing needs, and how it can affect one’s ability to reach their highest potential (Henwood et al., 2015).

   The needs of homeless youth are a public health issue now at the forefront of many organizations and are being addressed through the Housing First Model (Garcia & Kim, 2020). This places emphasis on helping youth reach self-sufficiency and self-actualization by eliminating housing insecurities and providing a sense of safety, as mentioned in tier two of Maslow’s theory (Pierce et al., 2018).
**Housing Interconnectivity**

Across the three primary housing models, (TLP, PSH, RRH), there are many common services offered and themes when considering what works and what does not work amongst these models which have little to no empirical evidence to support their effectiveness thus far. Curry et al. (2020) highlights many of these models incorporated the following interventions:

- Behavioral health services
- Case management supports
- Different housing interventions
- McKinney-Vento services for K-12 students
- General education supports
- Family therapy services
- Medical & dental services

These different supports confirmed what was echoed by multiple studies (Curry & Petering, 2017; Garcia & Kim, 2020; Holtschneider, 2016; Prock & Kennedy, 2017; Semborski et al., 2020) that the “one size fits-all” approach does not work when providing services to this heterogeneous group of homelessness youth as they benefit from a wide range of services, regardless of the housing model used.

Furthermore, Semborski et al. (2020) expresses the significance of providers using multiple housing models as well. In some cases, programs were being created from the ground up by program supervisors, while others were created based on existing programming. Key factors that are crucial to any of the models succeeding include seeking the input of the youth participating, offering structure while also teaching and offering independence.
Challenges of Youth Homelessness

Barriers and Facilitators

This next section will identify barriers, not only of the youth experiencing homelessness, but the barriers of school based (and community based) practitioners as well, as they are reflective of one another (Canfield, 2015).

The Department of Education asserts that homeless children face numerous barriers when it comes to being enrolled in schools and achieving academic goals. On the other hand, many districts continue to establish plans to help schools and youths experiencing homelessness overcome these barriers (Department of Education & Evaluation, 2002). When referring to educational barriers, or barriers in general, it is directly referencing anything that hinders practice. Conversely, there are practices that eliminate said barriers, and these are known as facilitators. An inverse relationship is shared between both barriers and facilitators. James Canfield says, “if an aspect of practice prevents an intervention, it is a barrier, but if the same aspect helps practice, it is a facilitator” (Canfield, 2015, p. 79). He continues to say, “For those working with homeless children and youth in school settings, barriers and facilitators are elements or systems that either prevent or aid educational opportunities” (Canfield, 2015, p. 79).

The barriers homeless youth face ranges from educational barriers all the way to social-emotional barriers. Having easier access to education is key in helping youth facilitate their homeless experience. The end goal is to offer educational, social-emotional, and technical aid to help youth and young adults receive the tools they need to not only overcome the barriers of homelessness, but to help them break the cycle of homelessness ("NN4Y Issue Brief: Education Barriers for Homeless Youth,"). Canfield’s research outlines a list of common themes identified as barriers and offers some ways to eliminate those barriers.
This list of barriers for homeless youth include the following: transience/instability, identification, attendance, communication, personal resources, transportation, community resources, cultural competence, family, embarrassment/resistance, policies, school administration, student compliance, obtaining records and physical wellbeing. Issues of social-emotional well-being and mobility were also mentioned and identified (Canfield, 2015). This next section will combine the mentioned barriers, and they will be categorized as: in school or out of school, academic performance, and execution of policies.

**In School or Out of School**

Youth experiencing homelessness can be in that situation for many varied reasons. A few of the reasons could be:

- The youth have been identified as “runaways” because they have run away from home.
- The youth have been forced out their homes by a parent (throwaways) due to issues in the home.
- The youth live outside or in a nontraditional, high-risk location (street youths).
- Or the youth spent time in foster care or another government system (systems youths).

This notion that there is no single cause for youth homelessness is imperative as it connects to the fact that the barriers faced by homeless youth in schools also vary by situation partly due to the transient nature of their living situations (Edidin et al., 2012). Due to homeless youths unstable housing situation, and their constant moves between schools, homeless youths experience a host of poor attendance outcomes (Canfield, 2015; Sulkowski & Joyce-Beaulieu, 2014).

The mobility issues faced lead to transportation issues as well. Unfortunately, though there are provisions within the MVA that address transportation issues. This barrier continues to
trouble youths and the school-based professionals who work with the homeless youths. While transportation is a major hurdle, a successful plan of action can help combat major attendance issues. In the early 2000s, Chicago Public Schools spent 2.1 million dollars to bus students to and from school. Another plan of action included picking up homeless youths first and dropping them off last. This simple plan was to diminish the obviousness of which youths were homeless and reducing the negative stigma of being homeless (Department of Education & Evaluation, 2002).

In a policy brief conducted by SchoolHouse Connection, one youth leaders says:

It’s hard to get to school every day when you’re experiencing homelessness—whether it is access to public transportation, food, clothing, sleep, fear of bullying because of your appearance, or the lack of material things (not having a backpack or necessary school supplies or support at home). Schools don’t always address these student insecurities. They run through a standard checklist, but there isn’t always strong follow through (2020, p. 1)

From this brief, the following 6 suggestions were provided to better facilitate the transportation barrier.

- Help students experiencing homelessness meet their basic needs.
- Be creative with transportation supports.
  - A liaison in Nashville rallied to hire an additional staff person to oversee transportation for MVA students. This led to a 7.2% decrease in chronic absenteeism amongst homeless youth.
- Foster a supportive school climate. When students feel safe and valued, they will be more likely to overcome challenges.
• Implement proven evidence-based truancy reduction and prevention programs.
• Collect data and have proactive systems intentionally responsive to students experiencing homelessness.
  o A Nevada school used real-time data and historical data to help improve attendance rates for students experiencing homelessness.
• Take a team approach to tackling attendance barriers (Connection, 2020).

**Academic Performance**

Poor academic achievement for youths experiencing homelessness is partly connected to mobility issues mentioned in the previous section (Manfra, 2019). Due to the number of unplanned school interruptions and chronic absenteeism that occurs, youths experiencing homelessness tend to perform lower on standardized tests, have lower grades, and are more likely to dropout compared to their non-homeless peers (Canfield, 2015). Sulkowski and Joyce-Beaulieu (2014) echo similar perceptions by sharing that less than 25% of students experiencing homelessness graduate from high school and 45% will repeat a grade.

Additionally, it is noted that students experiencing homelessness struggle in math and reading disciplines (Sulkowski & Joyce-Beaulieu, 2014). The Department of Education’s Executive Summary highlights students experiencing homelessness also struggle receiving special education services and access to gifted programs. Entry into head start or other preschool programs and other multi-tiered support services (MTSS) that offer modifications and accommodations for students who need literacy supports also presents a challenge (Department of Education & Evaluation, 2002).

Access to special education is problematic for youth experiencing homelessness. Data shows that 45% of students experiencing homelessness qualify for special education services,
though only 22% of those students are evaluated or receive services (Sulkowski & Joyce-Beaulieu, 2014). Other factors that lead to poor academic performance is the inability to obtain academic records. Since students are often between homes and sometimes between schools, not having updated academic records can place a child too far ahead, causing him or her to struggle academically, or it can place them behind (Canfield, 2015).

Manfra’s review of the literature concluded that though the students experiencing homelessness are at an academic disadvantage, homelessness is difficult to determine whether there is a negative impact over an extended period. Another conclusion is that stable school enrollment will lessen the effects homelessness has on academic performance (Manfra, 2019).

**Stakeholders Execution of Policies**

The McKinney-Vento Act is the primary policy that drives other policies. This policy is a collaborative one as its success is dependent on whether schools, communities, families, and homeless youth can work together to support youths experiencing homelessness. Accurately identifying students experiencing homelessness is important, but also ensuring youths and families experiencing homelessness are acquainted with their legal educational rights as identified in the MVA. How administrators respond to homelessness will be a contributing factor to how students experiencing homelessness feel, and how teachers and other school personnel respond to students experiencing homelessness (Canfield, 2015).

It is important that administrators follow through with all MVA procedures such as waiving enrollment documentation, making preschool easily accessible to students experiencing homelessness, monitor transportation issues and providing professional learning opportunities to the school community (parents, students, teachers) so they are aware of the McKinney Vento Act and how it can help serve students (Miller, 2011).
School Districts that did not receive MVA funding often relied on other sources to help with implementation (I.E. Title 1 funds). Schools who did not seek funding put no additional effort into securing outside funding to assist with implementing initiatives and programs for youths experiencing homelessness. Those educational institutions that did receive MVA funding were able to offer a variety of supports and services and communicated regularly with community providers (shelters and other homeless programs) to help identify needs of homeless youths and enroll those students who were not enrolled. As a study in 2002 showed, the needs were best met for homeless youth when communities, administrators, teachers, and other stakeholders worked together with a cross-disciplinary approach (Department of Education & Evaluation, 2002).

**Summary of Literature Review**

The above literature is crucial to this research as it identifies the stakeholders most connected to this research, their perceptions of the homeless demographic that they are serving, and their awareness, or lack thereof, of policies that directly effect this demographic of young people. Understanding the definitions of homelessness sets the stage when discussing the types of housing programs available and who can participate in those programs. Multiple definitions of homelessness also attributes to the challenges LEAs and SEAs have when trying to identify those experiencing homelessness, partly because it just depends on what agency is seeking the data, and in part to the youth not knowing if they are qualified as homeless.

Shifting teachers and pre-service teachers’ perspectives and seeing these students for who they are, and understanding their needs, allows educators to provide a more specific approach when offering accommodations and modifications in the classroom. This, as stated, will help address some of the academic barriers. Finally, the research around the different housing models
suggest not only is there not enough research conducted to determine which model works best, but many of the models offer many similarities. It did show that student voice has not been involved in the evaluation process.

Student voice is the piece that will provide perspective to teachers and pre-service teachers on how to teach and see them as contributing members of society. Student voice will also allow policy makers to know first-hand if the policies are being implemented in a way that is effectively meeting the needs of these students. Lastly, student voice can help with evaluating the different housing models, which can lead to a model that can be inserted anywhere to reap the same empowering benefits.

The missing piece of the literature is the student voice. This research is incomplete without the voice of the most critical stakeholder. Paulo Freire’s entire framework, introduced in the next chapter, is centered around students being critical educators as much as they are learners. Student reflection leads to political action. Political action, a form of Youth Empowerment, is what this research hopes to inform.

Research for youth empowerment programs on homelessness and the effectiveness of youth empowerment programs on homelessness are non-existent. Though there are significant anecdotal stories that suggest programs that implement youth empowerment have seen success, there is not enough research that focuses on the evaluation of youth empowerment of marginalized populations (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). Empowerment refers to a marginalized group feeling a sense of influential political decision making (Nelsen, 2021). Though there are multiple definitions of what youth empowerment might look like, it is suggested that programs and program youth agree on a definition on their own (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009). The goal of
empowerment is cultural action. Freire’s success with empowerment led to the start of cultural circles. Three types of empowerment are mentioned below:

- Psychological empowerment that includes self-mastery, self-efficacy, and individual empowerment.
- Process and outcome-oriented empowerment.
- And social and political action (Mohajer & Earnest, 2009, p. 425).

Lastly, this research hopes to move beyond deficit ideology that negatively labels youth experiencing homelessness. Instead, the goal is to make sense of their experiences through their narrative development (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). Pollard says

Personal narratives are powerful tools that can be used for unearthing how overlapping systems of oppression and privilege have real material consequences in the lives of everyday people with a view to developing a critical consciousness (Pollard, 2020, p. 80).

This represents another way critical consciousness can lead to youth empowerment, which will lead to political participation.
Chapter 3: Methodology

**Purpose of Study:**

The primary purpose of this research study is to examine the experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth (UHY) living in a housing program, through a critical pedagogical lens. Furthermore, this study looks to identify ways schools and nonprofit/community organizations can use the experiences of these youth to inform stakeholders of a curriculum (both in school and out of school) that will empower and uplift UHY based on their identified needs. Below are three essential questions that will guide this study.

**Research Questions:**

1. What are the lived experiences of unaccompanied youth in homelessness enrolled in the YourWay Homelessness Youth Program?

2. What are the institutional constraints/barriers that position youth in homelessness?

3. What is the political role of the community/school in relation to facilitating empowerment?

This study is an intentional effort to gain the insight and firsthand perspective of the invaluable voices of youth experiencing homelessness. This research has the potential to serve multiple purposes: the information gathered can be used to align the mission/vision of the studied organization to the reality per the youth directly impacted by the institution. This study can also be a way for financial contributors to see how their money is at work (this can be good or bad).

Though the aforementioned possibilities can be provoking, they are not the prime focal point. Instead, this study will teach stakeholders how to transform the learning opportunity for youth to be more of a democratic experience than that of dictatorship or “banking model” as
Freire shares (2000). The learning alluded to exceeds traditional learning in a classroom, but the learning offered from life experiences.

Case Study

This study will be a case study which is based on the constructivists claim that truth is based on the perspective of one who is being studied (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to three researchers, case studies have different definitions. Per Robert Yin, a “case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates the case… by addressing the ‘how’ or ‘why.’” Robert Stake defines case study as “study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances.” Finally, Sharan Merriam’s definition of case study refers to the qualitative method as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (Yazan, 2015). The working definition of case study for this research sums up to “a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

The case study for this research will focus on a combination of a particular group (YourWay Homeless Youth Program & Initiative Based Housing) while focusing on the youths in the program (unaccompanied homeless youth) and the activity of the program (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Yazan, 2015). Program activities refers to the visible curriculum and the hidden curriculum. Examples of the visible curriculum include financial literacy classes, resume building workshops, and computer etiquette courses. Hidden curriculum refers to concepts that are learned but are unintentionally taught. This could include concepts around how youth in homelessness are viewed, the roles and responsibilities of men and women, and how youth in homelessness should rely on the government assistance.
Essentially, the primary purpose of this study is to empower youth in homelessness. By engaging them in dialogue, learning what their needs are, identifying barriers they have identified, and using that knowledge to guide them as they seek change, empowerment leads to that empowerment. Critical pedagogy, which will be mentioned in the next section, is a framework that shifts those who are marginalized and unheard to a place of critical reflection that leads to action and transformation.

This study engages the youth experiencing homelessness in a reflection process that develops their critical consciousness. With a critical lens, this study challenges and encourages teachers (adults in general) to engage marginalized youth in conversations that are meant to lead them to liberation. In short, if adults working for a youth program that serves youth in homelessness are tasked with helping them overcome their housing insecurities, the youth must be led to feel empowered, and inspired. It is through their empowerment and critical awareness can true liberation and political action take place. This next section will further explore critical pedagogy, and its value towards this research.

**Theoretical Framework**

**Critical Pedagogy**

The way that a teacher teaches can be traced directly back to the way that the teacher has been taught. The time will always come when teachers must ask themselves if they will follow the mold or blaze a new trail. There are serious risks that come with this decision. It essentially boils down to whether one chooses to do damage to the system or to the student. (Emdin, 2016, p. 206).
As I begin to unpack this quote, I remind the readers that for the purpose of this study, teacher refers to any adult leader working with students, and student refers to unaccompanied homeless youth.

This challenge statement at the conclusion, “do damage to the system or to the student,” connects to Paulo Freire’s idea of moving from the “banking” model of education and transitioning to a more democratic process. This study’s essential goal is to empower student voice and learn from them instead of identifying their areas of need without consulting them. This requires adult stakeholders to have some level of critical consciousness, to have some level of empathy and hope for the students they serve, and ambitious standards and belief that the students they serve can become successful.

Emdin shares that “you cannot teach someone you do not believe in” (Emdin, 2016, p. 207). This critical pedagogical lens is dependent upon the teacher seeing the students as key stakeholders in their advancement of democracy and equality, and dependent upon the teachers’ commitment to social justice, social change, and their commitment to finding ways to lead transformative change in unjust and oppressive settings, while also cultivating intellect (Jeyaraj & Gandolfi, 2019).

Critical pedagogy is a framework that is grounded on a social and educational vision of justice and equality. Paulo Freire is considered to be the inaugural philosopher (Kincheloe, 2008) of critical pedagogy, though many pedagogues have been practicing long before the term was formalized in the field of education (McLaren, 1994).

**Critical Pedagogues**

Paulo Freire, a Brazilian philosopher, was jailed for his revolutionary teachings, and eventually deported, where he would continue his work. Part of Freire’s practice included
codifications, where he would use pictures and photographs as part of a research process directed at the students’ social, cultural, political, and economic environment. These photos depicted problems and contradictions. The students would then step back and ask themselves the following questions: What do these photos tell you about your lives, and what are the unseen forces and structures that are at work in these images? This motivated students to gain literacy as a way of creating change in both their own lives and society (Kincheloe, 2008).

Henry Giroux believed that “critical pedagogy must be motivational enough to move students and teachers beyond critique and into actions that ‘explode the reifications of the existing society,’ replacing them with socially just relations” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 50). Giroux introduces the micro and macro classroom objectives (macro-objectives are designed to enable students to make connections between the methods/content & micro-objectives represent the course content). Having students uncover the connections between course objectives and the norms, values, and structural relationships of the wider society is what makes the relationship between the micro and macro-objectives significant (McLaren, 1994). Like McLaren, Giroux believed that critical pedagogy must be formed around the stories and experiences that shape student voice. Peter McLaren also believed that critical teachers must engage in the challenging work of developing a coherent philosophy of praxis (Kincheloe, 2008).

Ira Shor began exploring Freire’s framework with the intent to apply it to the Northern American classrooms. He believes critical instructors must struggle to find strategies that encourage students rather than discourage them from thinking of themselves as critical agents guiding their own education (Kincheloe, 2008). Empowering education is what Ira Shor is known for. His eleven principles of empowering education are: participatory, affective, problem-posing, situated, multicultural, dialogic, de-socializing, democratic, researching,
interdisciplinary, and activist. The belief is that traditional education suppresses, regulates students to positions of powerlessness, and fails to acknowledge the strengths and cultures, which cause students and teachers alike to feel disconnected and alienated from schooling and what is being taught. In the end, Shor suggests teachers research what the students know, speak, experience, and feel to create the critical paradigm that respects the experiences of their students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Like Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson is another pedagogue who does not stem from the Freirean school of critical pedagogy, yet his practice relates to critical pedagogy. Woodson is the 2nd African American to receive his Ph.D. from Harvard and is the author of The Miseducation of the Negro. Critical Scholars Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) also embrace the work of Woodson as a form of critical pedagogy. They draw from one of his famous quotes which states:

> When you can control a man’s thinking you do not have to worry about his actions. You do not have to tell him not to stand here or go yonder. He will find his “proper place” and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door. He will go without being told. In fact, if there is no back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary (Woodson, 2018).

**Beyond the Traditional Curriculum**

It is stressed that there is more to curriculum than just it being a program of study, a classroom text, or a course syllabus. Furthermore, no curriculum, policy, or program is ideologically or politically innocent. This is referencing the hidden curriculum, which refers to learning outcomes not openly acknowledged to learners. The hidden curriculum also refers to the unintended outcomes of the schooling process. Critical educators have a duty to continue to examine and identify unjust practices, counter them, and provide empowering educational
opportunities to make education just for all students, specifically, those who are oppressed. With this, critical educators must not revert to the banking model of education, avoid false generosity (Freire, 2000), and must encourage oppressed people to challenge the tendency to associate one’s freedom with the ability to oppress others, a term known as sub-oppressors (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

Critical pedagogy demands a deep reconceptualization of the following:

- Identifying what human beings can achieve.
- The role of the social, cultural, and political in shaping human identity.
- The relationship between community and schooling.
- The ways that power operates to create purposes for schooling that are not necessarily in the best interest of the children that attend them.
- How teachers and students might relate to knowledge.
- The ways schooling affects the lives of the students from marginalized groups, and
- The organization of schooling and the relationship between teachers and learners.

The core of Freire’s framework is centered around praxis, and Duncan-Andrade & Morrell share that drawing upon what they call the “cycle of critical praxis,” which educators can create and implement a dynamic curriculum that meets the direct needs of the students they serve. The cycle of critical praxis includes:

- Identifying a problem within one’s community
- Researching the problem, which is the first step that leads towards action and praxis
- Developing a collective plan of action that addressed the problem that has been identified above
- Implementing the collective plan of action
- And finally, evaluating the action plan, assessing its efficacy, and re-examining the state of the problem (Freire, 2000, p. 12)

Henry Giroux, another known critical pedagogue, combined the work of Freire and a few others (Pierre Bourdieu, Stanly Aronowitz, and other theorists from the Frankfurt School) to develop his praxis which shares some similarities (Kincheloe, 2008). McLaren acknowledges that identifying the need of the students is a crucial starting point for practicing critical pedagogy (McLaren, 1994). Critical pedagogy investigates the “why” and “how” knowledge is constructed, and the “how” and “why” some constructs are legitimized and honored by the dominant culture. Knowledge can be referred to as technical knowledge, which is based on the natural sciences (state tests, and other data that shows what students technically learn). Knowledge can also refer to practical knowledge, which focuses on enlightening individuals so they can shape their daily actions, and emancipatory knowledge, which is the foundation for social justice and empowerment. Emancipatory knowledge is considered the primary intention of critical pedagogy (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

**Banking Model**

Technical knowledge displays a student’s ability to regurgitate information that has been deposited in them by a teacher. Part of the flaw in this model is that this form of educational practice, that deposits curriculum and evaluates a student’s understanding of that curriculum, recognizes the students as merely objects. Freire calls this model the “banking model.” The banking model implies that
The teacher teaches and the students are taught.
The teacher knows everything, and the students know nothing.
The teacher thinks and the students are thought about.
The teacher talks and the students listen-meekly.
The teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined.
The teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply.
The teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher.
The teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it.
The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students.
The teacher is the subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects (Freire, 2000, p. 73).

**Relationship Between Teachers & Students**

Before critical pedagogy can work, teachers must understand what is happening in the minds of their students (Kincheloe, 2008). Freire says for teachers to understand what students are experiencing, they must engage in dialogue. “Sooner or later, a true revolution must initiate a courageous dialogue with the people.” (Freire, 2000, p. 128). Revolutionary leaders practice co-intentional education; dialogue that includes the voices of their students. These leaders must go in, not with the intention of bringing salvation to their students, but with the hopes of engaging in dialogue, learning the objectives of the situation and their awareness of that situation.
Not only do critical educators need to begin understanding the cultural and social forms through which students define themselves, but they must also learn to use those experiences in ways that do not minimize or belittle them (Freire, 2000). Additionally, critical pedagogues should create opportunities to use what they are learning from their students to develop curriculum and material that directly impact the lives of their students (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

In a critical school culture, teachers see themselves as learners, and not educators who are depositing material they have been provided from top down (Kinchele, 2008). Freire offers the formula that recognizes authentic education as something that is carried out by “A” (teacher) with “B” (student) (Freire, 2000, p. 93). “One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the view of the world held by the people. Such a program constitutes cultural invasion, good intentions notwithstanding” (Freire, 2000, p. 95).

In short, for education to be successful, the oppressed must participate in the action that leads a liberation (Freire, 2000). This leads to the sole purpose of critical pedagogy: to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequalities and injustices. Critical pedagogy is meant to heal, repair, and transform the world (tikkun olam) (McLaren, 1994). Its fundamental concern is understanding the relationship between power and knowledge.

**Critical Approach to Methodology**

… Critical practitioners and researchers assume that the type of knowledge being sought in critical research is far from being value-free or universally true, and therefore consider it essential to conduct ongoing interrogation of their political or moral stance, ideology, and positionality with relation to their clients/participants (Farias et al., 2016, p. 237).
The word critical, based on the idea of critique, challenges what is known as common sense, and questions unequal power relations while working towards social change. Critical epistemology, like social transformation, aims to counter the status quo as the central moral purpose. This moral purpose calls out assumptions and thoughts that cause oppression and instead promotes justice.

Critical epistemology, while challenging, is a “critically engaged process that embrace and recognize alternative forms of knowledge” (Farias et al., 2016, p. 238). This critical approach is what is driving this study. It helps me, the researcher, recognize the importance of engaging in critical reflexive epistemological dialogue to challenge oppressive and social structures that silence the voices of homeless youth.

**Data Collection**

**Researcher Positionality**

The purpose of this research study is to critically investigate the lived experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth and use their stories to promote change within a system that is intended to encourage independence and remove oppressive barriers. As a former homeless youth, I am not only connected to the research participants, but I am also connected to the community in which I will be analyzing data from. I have lived in the site where the research will be conducted and have participated in the programs offered to youth in the program. It is important for me to recognize that my connection to this research matters personally and professionally (Maguire et al., 2019). My experiences are different from the participants, though they are similar. It is important to not influence the stories of the participants in anyway based on my experiences.
Selection & Recruitment of Participants

Considering the intention of this study, the specific targeted group, and the focus on housing programs, it is important to find a group of youth who are in a current housing program for youth experiencing homelessness. Additionally, the students who are being targeted must be unaccompanied and not living in a homeless shelter with a parent or guardian, but a housing program that focuses on building youth self-efficacy and independency. While considering participants, it became clear to me that the ideal participants are those who are currently involved in the YourWay Youth Program.

In the city of Warrensville (pseudonym), Initiative Based Housing Inc. serves as a nonprofit that provides affordable housing to a variety of people on diverse life journeys. Initiative Based Housing has programs for the general homeless population, but they also have youth programs that provide housing and other supports to help youth 18-24 reach their goals. As a participant of this program from 21 years of age to 24 years of age, I am familiar with the type of program opportunities offered to the youth, but I am also aware of the diverse population of youth experiencing homelessness. Since the program is offered to an age group (18-24) which is right in line with the age group presented by HUD ((USICH), 2015) this group of youth are the ideal target for this study.

In general, this study focused on unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness in the YourWay Youth Program ages 18-24. To ensure that the data collected gives the study the best chance to bear significant fruit, the youth chosen were asked to have been in the program for at least 6 months of the allotted 12 months of eligibility. This allowed the participants to have clearer knowledge of what the program offered and a reliable account of how they joined the program. Additionally, participants had a clearer idea of their exit plan upon completing the
program, and favorable insight into the relationships they have formed while in the program. Lastly, they were able to have a better understanding of how those relationships contribute to their potential success.

I included 5 participants to participate in the study. There was no preference over race, sex, or sexual orientation, but the demographic data was collected as a way of concluding whether those data could influence the results. Finally, I sought participants who lived in the Dyson Avenue Suites, a specific building designated to youth in the YourWay Youth Program. This was ideal as it allowed me to meet with the youth around the same time and it also opened the door for the possibility of incorporating a small group component to the interview process.

Table 3.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Type of Disability</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Avg. Length in Program</th>
<th>Highest Level of Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tajunique</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>12-24 months (about 2 years)</td>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jacen</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Specific Learning Disability</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Bi-Sexual</td>
<td>6-9 months</td>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydell</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>12-24 months (about 2 years)</td>
<td>Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DJ</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Specific Learning Disability &amp; Physical Disability</td>
<td>White/Other</td>
<td>Bi-Sexual</td>
<td>6-9 months</td>
<td>Some College</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LaMelo</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Bi-Racial</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>12-24 months (about 2 years)</td>
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<tr>
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</tbody>
</table>

The table above shows that majority of the participants were males, more than half had a specific learning disability, and all but one of the participants were black or bi-racial. Additionally, while there were participants who identified as straight and bi-sexual, none of the participants identified as non-binary or transgender. It was unclear of how many of the program participants were male or female. Sexual orientation was also an unknown. It is worth noting, there were other female participants who were recruited for this study, however, none of them were available to participate. Lastly, there was a candidate who did not identify as straight or bi-sexual, but they were unwilling to participate in the study.
**Qualitative Study**

I used semi-structured interviews where there is a detailed guide and list of questions that focuses on specific life events, memories and/or critical life episodes (Lapan et al., 2012). These interviews lasted between 45-100 minutes long. During that time, I utilized a tape recorder and the zoom recording feature to capture the audio. The recordings were then used to allow me to transcribe the interviews. As the interviews were taking place, I focused on what happened in the moment. I took brief notes during the interview as a way of marking specific details to assist with the transcription afterwards. I was intentional about taking minimal notes in order to spend more time with the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007).

**Trustworthiness**

To confirm the data I analyzed was accurate, I utilized the member checking tool to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and/or a nod to validation. After the data was reviewed, I shared the finalized results with each individual interviewee to include them in the final process. Finally, I used a triangulation method as another method of validity and reliability as it helped increase the credibility as well. The interviews conducted, along with the research that is included in chapter 2 and my personal observations/experiences served as the 3 data sources which allowed me to cross check the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

**Data Analysis/Interpretation**

The 5 interviews were recorded using an audio recorder. After the interviews were completed, each audio file was uploaded into otter.ai, an online transcription software that starts the transcription process. After the transcriptions were started, I went through and made manual edits to make sure each interview was accurately transcribed. I made sure to insert the different nuances found in face-to-face conversations into the transcripts (something the software initially
did not catch). Once the transcriptions were complete, they were uploaded into a computer analysis program (QSR International’s NVivo) which was used to code the transcripts and to conduct a Thematic Analysis as presented by Braun & Clarke (2006) in their article *Using thematic analysis in psychology*. In this article they share the 6 phases of thematic analysis which include: familiarizing yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Each transcript was reviewed multiple times. After each review, codes were created based on how the information was interpreted at that time. For example, during the first review of the transcript, I would read a phrase that referred to education. During a second read, I would code it more specifically as high school. Following the coding process of the transcript, specific phrases from each transcript were placed with the code it represented most. At the end of coding each transcript, codes were combined to create themes as demonstrated in the figure below.

Figure 3.2

Computer analysis assists in organizing the data, but it does not complete the analysis (Carvajal, 2002). Once the data was organized, I began to create mind maps and hierarchy charts to explore what each theme would address based on the transcripts that have been analyzed. For
instance, the data showed support systems as a recurring theme. From there, I connected the different codes that were closely related to the theme. I noticed 4 sub-theme: family, the community, schools, and friendships. Statements from the transcripts were then linked to the sub-themes. The figures below provides additional context.

Figure 3.3

![Figure 3.3](image)

Figure 3.4

![Figure 3.4](image)

After the analysis was complete, 3 themes were further explored: 1. Support systems, 2. Youth trauma, and 3. Educational experiences. These themes were drawn out after thorough review of the transcripts.
**Research Site**

Initiative Based Housing is the primary service provider for city residents experiencing homelessness in Western Pennsylvania. Since 2010, YourWay Youth program has served as the primary program for unaccompanied homeless youth ("Action-Housing’s My Place Program: Innovative Housing for Allegheny County’s Vulnerable Youth," 2020). In total, the YourWay Youth Program has

- 24 units (residents) in the Dyson Avenue Suites.
- 5 youth in the HUD funded permanent supportive housing program.
- 65 unaccompanied homeless youth in scatter sites (rapid rehousing).
- And 12 youth in the Pathway to independence program.

The research site for this study was conducted at the Dyson Avenue Suites of the YourWay Youth Program in the Uptown area of Warrensville.

This research site is intentional as it allows the research participants to partake in the study in the comforts of their own home. This turned out to be beneficial as it increased the number of youths who were able to participate by eliminating the obvious barrier of transportation. Many of the youth who participate in this program do not have access to their own personal vehicle, and some may not have access to public transportation. This location also allowed for flexibility for participants who needed to adjust their day or time of the interview. For example, one participant had missed 2 scheduled interviews, but because he saw me waiting to schedule another participant, his interview was able to be rescheduled for that day.

Additionally, this site also allowed me to collect data of the physical space.

Finally, the communal area in the loft is a neutral location as opposed to their apartment. This allows for both the participants and me to remain safely distanced in a large common space,
adhering to COVID-19 protocols. The youth living in the lofts are the ideal candidates/participants for this study because of their diverse homeless experiences, making their contributions to this study immensely cherished.

**Identification of Stakeholders**

*Possibilities for Moving from Theory to Practice in Urban Schools* authors Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) paint the picture of a critical pedagogue who utilizes hip-hop and urban students’ sophisticated literacy practices to pair hip-hop culture with poetry. These educators tapped into the interest of the students they taught, understood their cultural connections, and were able to use their skillset in connection with what was being required via the traditional curriculum. These efforts countered those of the other educators and through relationship building and culturally relevant pedagogy, this critical pedagogical approach helped challenge the negative notion that these students were “functionally illiterate and lacking in intellect” (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008, p. 56).

Critical Pedagogy can have a differing impact on the learner/student than it does on the teacher/instructor. Teachers/instructors are an important stakeholder to the critical pedagogy framework as they are responsible for examining and challenging the curricula and offering the invisible education that shows their support of the underserved (the student/learner) and their experiences. This requires teachers to move beyond the transactional method of delivering instruction while pursuing critical perspectives, showing cultural competence and interest, and most importantly, displaying a willingness to understand the stories of their students, and using those stories for the empowerment of their students (Freire, 2000).

Another group of beneficiaries of this research are school administrators, program managers, board of directors, and other personnel responsible for hiring and training
staff. Though nonprofits serve a demographic of oppressed and marginalized communities, those leading these organizations could not be any less representative of their targeted population (Mason et al., 2019). This makes it hard for them to lead empowerment initiatives that helps liberate oppressed youth since they have no understanding of how structural marginalization operates. This research will reveal to administrators and other adult leaders (school leaders and community leaders alike) the voices of the vulnerable, provide understanding of youths’ awareness of their needs and barriers, and allow these leaders to take political action that can lead to data driven change to best support and serve unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

For the sake of this research, the teacher/instructor, though traditionally might be the classroom teacher, refers to any educator, educational specialist, administrator, homeless liaison, and adult member of a non-profit community (program manager, director, case manager, etc.). Though Freire refers to the teacher to student relationship, this research refers to the student as unaccompanied homeless youth (both in schools and in housing programs). Since research rarely focuses on the lived experiences of youth experiencing homelessness (Mohan & Shields, 2014), unaccompanied homeless youth are the primary stakeholders. Furthermore, the stories they tell, and other data collected from their interviews will offer a blueprint for educators to provide a more critical pedagogical approach based on the actual needs shared by the students they serve.
After the initial dissertation proposal occurred in October, I immediately began working on the IRB application. Upon receiving approval from the IRB in mid-November, I began to recruit youth from the YourWay Youth Program to participate in the study. The recruitment process lasted approximately 1 week. Though I hoped to recruit up to 7 participants, I cut recruitment off after receiving confirmation that 6 youth would participate. Interviews were scheduled during the recruitment process and the first interview occurred 1 day after the recruitment period started. Unfortunately, 1 participant backed out which left me with 5 participants. After each participant scheduled their interview, the interview questions were distributed in person.

Additionally, participants received a paper copy of the consent form to review prior to their interview. Some of the participants had up to a week to review the interview questions, while other participants had a day to review the questions. During the interview, participants reviewed the consent form, reviewed the questions, signed a COVID-19 protocol form and
completed the interview. After the interviews have ended, I immediately uploaded the audio files into otter.ai and began to transcribe the data. This process took about 1 month. Following the transcription, I began analyzing the data and completed a thematic analysis. After the analysis was completed, I started writing chapter 4 and chapter 5. This process took approximately 3 months from the time of the dissertation proposal to the completion of chapter 4 and 5 (October 4 to January 3, 2022).

**Summary**

In conclusion, this qualitative case study featured 5 interviewees, all of whom reside at the Dyson Avenue Suites of the YourWay Youth Program. Computer software was used to transcribe the interview audio and to analyze the data. The interviews were semi-structured which will allowed for some flexibility with the questions and the overall structure of the interview. The participants all ranged between the ages of 20-21 years old, and most of the participants were African American, except for 1 participant. A thematic analysis was conducted which led me to 3 themes: UHY understanding of their support systems, youth trauma, and the educational experiences of UHY.
Chapter 4: Description of the Findings

**Results**

This chapter divulges in the results of the collected data from this study that features youth experiencing homelessness at the YourWay Youth Program. Analyzed data from this study propounds multiple stories that represent the experiences of 5 of the youth living in this program. The data includes stories of how the youth became homeless and stories of what led them to this program. Equally important, this data sheds light on the youths’ perception of education, their understanding of support, and provides context to what the youth believe is necessary to help them overcome their homeless experience. Study participants included five program youth who lived in the YourWay loft. Each youth brings their own unique viewpoint of youth homelessness and the supports available to them through this program. Below outlines the demographics of the five participants.

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</table>
LaMelo

<table>
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</tr>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the conclusion of the interviews, transcriptions, and data analysis, the following themes surfaced: 1. support systems, 2. youth trauma, and 3. educational experiences. Program youth participants shared their perspectives of their support systems within the YourWay Youth program, and their idea of support outside of the program. Some of their supports included family members, friends, program staff members, mentors, and other key stakeholders who they view as key contributors to their success in this program and their success in conquering their housing insecurities. On the contrary, some of their reflections around their support systems include what they had hoped support would look like, and how support sometimes comes from unexpected allies.

In addition to their idea of their support systems, participants often discussed the many traumatic experiences they have lived through. These traumatic occurrences involved abuse (sexual, physical, mental, verbal) and were often caused by family members, members of the foster care system, teachers, and friends. Finally, the participants spoke of their educational experiences by telling of their educational goals (which they all shared would help them get out of homelessness), their viewpoint of how their teachers treated them which led them to love or hate formal education, and their understanding of the value of education (both formal and informal education).

The 1-hour semi-structured interviews were held in the conference room of the YourWay lofts, where the participants live. This chapter will include many quotes and narratives that
elaborate on their ideas of success, family, education, trauma, and other topics extracted from the interviews. Fortunately, with COVID-19 protocols in place, interviews were conducted in person and interviewees wore face masks while being socially distanced away from the interviewer.

**Participant Introductions**

**Tajunique**

Tajunique is a 21-year-old female who has lived in the YourWay Youth program for two years. She is a product of the foster care system that has not only failed her but has led to her lack of faith in the foster care system. Tajunique has endured a long history of abuse (physical, sexual, etc.), and despite it all, she has been determined to see herself succeed while also hoping to inspire her younger sister to do the same. Currently, Tajunique is seeking a culinary degree while attending Warrensville Community College. Tajunique was eager to participate in this study as she wanted to share her perspective of what the child welfare system could do to improve its practice to better support the youth in the system.

**Jacen**

Jacen is a 20-year-old male student who joined the YourWay Youth program in 2020. Jacen, who has high functioning autism, has endured a history of neglect and rejection by his biological mother. Upon entering the program, Jacen had been physically assaulted by his mother, which led him to seek safety. After a brief stint with a friend, he was introduced to the YourWay program and has been here since. Jacen brings his passion for cinematic arts and his love for Star Wars to this program. It has been the one thing that motivates him to overcome his homeless experience with the hopes of becoming self-sufficient. While Jacen missed the initial recruitment for this study, he was determined to participate to offer his praises for the YourWay Program.
**Lydell**

Lydell is a 20-year-old male who has been a YourWay Your program participant for the last year but has been in the foster care system for the bulk of his life. After moving to Dyson, PA, Lydell has been in 22+ foster homes. After briefly talking with Lydell during the recruitment process, it was clear he had a unique story that would be valuable to this research. Lydell shares a distinctive viewpoint of education and the value of education. Additionally, Lydell introduces us to his struggle with drugs and alcohol while also identifying the source which led to his drug usage. Though Lydell missed his first 2 interviews, when he did show, he provided many key anecdotes that introduces his experiences as a youth experiencing homelessness and the hardship suffered while in the foster care system.

**DJ**

DJ is a 20-year-old male who immigrated to America by way of an adoption program that connects youth living in an orphanage with American families. DJ first visited America during the holiday season 10 years ago, and then he came back with his now former family. Following a failed adoption, DJ found out about the YourWay program where he has been a resident since February of 2021. DJ talks a lot about the value of friendship, the importance of being positive regardless of the many challenges one faces, and he shares his passion for writing motivational songs. DJ was the first recruited participant and was overjoyed to participate in this study.

**LaMelo**

LaMelo is a 21-year-old bi-racial male who spent much of his life with his maternal grandfather. LaMelo lived with his mother at one point, however, due to her struggles with drugs and alcohol, LaMelo found himself staying with different family members, which eventually led to him living with this grandfather. LaMelo graduated from a local suburban school where he
starred in football. LaMelo tells of his academic challenges both in high school (1.9 GPA) and in college. Even as a football star, LaMelo faced a host of challenges on and off the field which eventually led him to dropping out of college and saw him joining the YourWay Youth Program 2 years ago. LaMelo currently attends Warrensville Community College and hopes to transfer to a local university where he aspires to become a teacher.

**Findings**

Table 4.2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support Systems</td>
<td>YourWay Youth Program participants discussed their perceptions of what support looks like, who provides that support, and the type of support they hoped to receive from different members of their support system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Youth Trauma</td>
<td>YourWay Youth Program participants share their experiences with trauma both leading up to their homelessness and during their time as a homeless youth. This abuse ranges from sexual abuse to mental/emotional abuse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Experiences</td>
<td>YourWay Youth Program participants explain their educational experiences. This includes their educational aspirations, the trauma they have endured from stakeholders within the educational institutions, and this includes some of their opinions regarding the value of education.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Support Systems

In advance of the next section, it is important a definition of relationships is established. Relationships, as understood in this data, refer to the participant’s connections with family, friends, drugs, school personnel, and community affiliates. These relationships were mostly cited as negative in this section, especially in regard to the participants relationships with their parents and other family members. However, there are positive examples that are pointed out. The next sections will highlight good relationships, bad relationships, healthy relationships, unhealthy relationships, new relationships, intentionally distanced relationships, and ended relationships.

Relationships with Family Members

Over the course of the 5 interviews, a common theme started with the idea that the participants had no connection or positive relationship with their biological families. Often, this meant the participant had severed ties with their biological parents, they did not know their parents, or they made the executive decision to isolate themselves from their parents.

LaMelo mentioned that he had not been raised by his mother since he was 11 years old while his dad, who had 7 other children, was never there to raise him. Similarly, Tajunique had completely cut her mother off. Tajunique talks about some of the traumatizing things her mother had done, and the smartest thing to do was distance herself from her mom. Tajunique explains that if she wants to talk to her, that is a decision she makes. Otherwise, due to her toxic relationship with her mother, not relying on support is the safest and most wise decision she can make.

Jacen talked about his ability to develop support systems despite his troubled relationship with his mother. After talking about his biggest takeaway from the impact his mother has had on
him and his ability to build relationships he said, “It just shows me not to really associate myself with people like my mother.” Lydell talked about not having a relationship with his mom since he was 12 years old. As far as his relationship with his dad goes, it was also non-existent. When talking about his dad he says

   My dad’s a big manipulator. He’s the go-to manipulator. He wants to make it seem like it was my mom’s fault. My mom made it seem like it was his fault. You know… He’s beating on her. He told me she was keeping the kids from him the whole time…

The want to build a relationship was minimal due to his inability to trust his dad. The only participant who had a positive relationship with one or both of their parents was DJ.

   DJ spent the first six months of his life living in the NICU of a European hospital after fighting for his life. After leaving the hospital he went to live in an orphanage. After he was paired with an American family, he was introduced to who he then thought was his aunt. It was his biological mother. Prior to this reunion, DJ had never met his mother. Immediately after, DJ was informed that his biological mother had passed away. He was crushed as he always wanted to have a relationship with his mother.

   Once DJ moved to the states with his new American mother, he felt that he finally had the mother he had always wanted. Unfortunately, his American adoption did not last long, and he ended up homeless. DJ’s positive perspective on life and all of life’s events led him to say the following after asked whether he still communicates with his former adoptive mom,

   Yeah, we talk all the time. We’re just not going to live together no more. And I felt like I’m glad. I’m grateful I don’t actually live with her no more. Because I feel like I don’t have to see her go through the pain with me (in the house).
He shared that though his adopted mom could not handle the struggles of raising him with his health challenges, he still stays in contact and considers her a part of his support system. DJ shows that support can come from family members even if you do not live in the same home as them.

Additional supports that were mentioned by the participants are the supports of grandparents, siblings, and the support of relatives. Many of the participants shared there was a lack of support from their parents, however, they all expressed support from other family members. Jacen talks about his grandmother being one of his biggest supporters and one of the only family members he stays in contact with. LaMelo spoke highly of his relationship with his grandfather, who became his legal guardian for most of his teenage years, as well. Regrettably, things did not work out. LaMelo said

I’m like, wow! My pap… The man I love the most kicked me out of my house. The man I consider to be like my dad, or, you know… Kind of like my dad and mom to be honest… I’m heartbroken… No matter what happens, I’ll never let nobody bring me down like that again.

LaMelo saw his only support cut ties with him.

Now, DJ says when things do not work out with one family member “find a new one that you can trust. Families should be always about love and caring, not about shutting you down and walking away.” That is exactly what LaMelo did. That is what a lot of the participants did. They found supports from others. LaMelo mentions the downfall of switching supports. He shares that there are always strings attached. After being kicked out by his grandpa, he found support from his aunt. Though this was a match he was comfortable with, he was concerned about how long the support would last, and if he had to pay rent.
Tajunique’s experience was slightly different. While some of the participants felt comfortable relying on the next family member for support, even with strings attached, Tajunique felt they relied on her and depended on her for too much support (financial, emotional, general). Tajunique mentioned feeling like the support she needed from others was expected of her but not reciprocated. This made her rely less on family for support, but she remained hopeful that she could receive more support from the friendships she had built.

**The Power of Friendships**

When participants were unable to find support from family members, many of them relied on the support of their friends. Jacen, who had been dealing with hardship between his mother, he relied on the support of his friend. He states,

I stayed over her house for like five days. Then one of my oldest friends was able to take me in. We are really good friends and I really consider her support because I talk to her when I need someone to talk to.

This idea is echoed by other participants as well. DJ talks about his friend Bobby (pseudonym) who has always been there for him, especially when times were hard. Bobby has been a major support to DJ since they met. DJ considers Bobby to be a listening ear that he can trust, and who is always there whenever he is needed. During his past 9 months in the program, it was clear Bobby has been active in helping DJ adjust to his new way of living.

LaMelo, on the other hand, has friends that he can count on, but he categorizes them by those who he trusts completely and lets them all the way in, and those who he places boundaries on. LaMelo talked a lot about his friends from high school and how they are active in his life to an extent. LaMelo reveals that he has not invited his friends from high school to his apartment as
many of them are unaware of his homeless situation. When asked whether he has been able to build friendships within the lofts, here is what LaMelo had to say,

So, I could have made friends inside of this building. But I chose not to from a perspective of I didn't know what they were going through. And this is their home space. So, I’m going to treat this same way as how I would want to be treated right because that’s what they say you treat others how you want to be treated. And me personally, like this is my home. It's like my safe haven, right? Like even with people coming to my apartment.

I don't really bring people here because one we had talked about, you know, it was kind of a little weird. But also, this is my domain. Like, this is where I come and lay my head every day, you know? So, I don't want my neighbor banging on my door at three in the morning talking about you know, this and that or, I don't know, that's just what it was. So, I really, you know, I will say hi and bye that's it. And that was personally why I didn't really talk to too many people where I could have, you know? It ain’t like that, like, it wasn't like I didn't want to make friends, right?

Tajunique talked about how her friends are limited and she does not really trust many people, hence the reason her support systems are almost non-existent. Tajunique said “I don’t know how to pick friends because I always have friends that use me. So, I have associates.” She continued to talk about after a certain amount of time, those associates either stay associates or become like family. Tajunique continues to say,

Ok, so you know the saying "Blood is thicker than water." I look at it as This…

Sometimes water's thicker than blood… But they both leak. So, you don't know who to
trust at the end of the day. Family ain't always meant to be family and what brings into family is loyalty.

Tajunique does mention Ashley (pseudonym) as one of her closest friends, who unlike LaMelo, she met inside the lofts. Ashley is someone Tajunique hopes to continue her friendship with after she exits the lofts. The same cannot be said for other associates of hers. Tajunique said

If you don't have my number, you're not meant to have it because at the end, if you have a number and you're not motivating me or calling me check up on me you're not meant to have my stuff. Because you're calling me to be nosy. You are who you surround yourself around to. You start to act like them. You start to dress like them. You start to talk like them, you start to walk like them. and I want to be around businesspeople because you could teach me something that I want to learn.

As Tajunique continues to learn how to be independent, continues to pursue her education, and continues to learn who she is, she only wants to be connected to people who are going to push her, teach her, and motivate her. She highlights if she is going to get to where she wants to go, she is going to do it alone or with the help of friends who are where she aspires to be.

Finally, LaMelo, who also hopes to achieve educational and personal goals, believes that a core group of friends is what is needed to help him stay focused and on track to accomplish his goals. LaMelo, like Tajunique, believes he needs to connect himself to people who are where he hopes to go.

So, it's kind of hard, you know? And I think if you had… If I have more friends closer to me in just even like, same school wise or in school? It would be easier to get school done. I don't know.
Supports within “The System”

A question that appeared in the interviews frequently was what is the point of the system? The participants often questioned the purpose of the system that has done more damage than good. Tajunique outlined her years in foster care and in group homes and she had this to say,

You're not helping them apply for houses. You're not starting financial wealthiness for the youth. You don't want to really do the research. I just feel like oh, every kid that comes in the system is money on y’all, because y'all receive that. But if it was on the other foot, oh, you wouldn't know what to do. Because you feel like they determine, determine if I go or if I stay. Yeah, y'all don't want to really sit down and help kids be financially stable, teach them about credit scores, teach them about stocks, teach them about investing, teach them about real estate, teach them about business & management, teach them about owning your own. The goal is for you to own your own. not for you to come out and be homeless.

According to Tajunique’s perception, the system is not doing their part to help youth become independent, financially stable, or self-sufficient. Instead, the system is enabling co-dependent youth who rely on supports of the system that keep them repeating a cycle of dependence. Other participants shared that their connection to system employees (Children Youth and Families, Department of Human Services, Independent Living Initiative) is what gave them access to the YourWay Youth Program.

Many of them were appreciative of their access to this program and were grateful they could be connected. However, that access came with its barriers. The reality is the participants understood that the reason they were connected was because of their affiliation with foster care and other foster care programs. These experiences, though they led to YourWay Youth program,
came with many trials. Lydell talked about how although he was in foster care, and though he relied on his foster family to support his basic needs (food, water, housing, etc.), he said many times there was expired food in the refrigerator. He talked about times where the support he was offered was solely dependent on his willingness to “be the son they never had.”

LaMelo talks about his Kids Voice attorney being the person who referred him to the program. He says,

I reached out to my Kids Voice lawyer that I had always kept in touch with… I just call him (and) I say, look, I'm homeless, like I really don't have a place to stay. Is there any programs or something you'd be able to help me out with? And that's how I ended up here. He vouched for me, he went to Mr. Green (pseudonym), and vouched for me. And Mr. Green made it happen and got me in here.

DJ also was connected to the program through his caseworker after he left his adopted family. Similarly, Jacen was able to be referred to this program by his former case worker as well. One thing that they all shared after joining the YourWay Youth Program was the amount of support they receive from the program staff is undoubtedly high. From teaching financial classes to helping the participants cover some of their financial obligations, the YourWay Youth program has been a major asset to program participants. DJ says this place cares about their residents. He continues by saying the staff are willing to do whatever is necessary to help them with whatever they need.

Lydell talks about 1 specific case manager who has been a great support for him.

Ms. Sommers (pseudonym) came from ABC program (pseudonym) like I did. I was playing music and I she seen me when I had my car. She saw a lot of me when I first came back into the system, so she saw it. Now she moved over here
the first week I moved over here and um, I feel like yeah, I get everything I need. She would send me money sometimes. First it started out for my car and then started out just for me personally and now she's cut it off and that helped me build the reality of, you know, this ain't forever.

Ms. Sommers used her resources to help support Lydell when he needed assistance, but she also has used their relationship to establish boundaries to help teach him how to be responsible.

DJ talks about the aspects of the program that help the participants feel like people and not like they are being punished for being there. He says that the program staff take them on outings, expose them to activities they have never been previously exposed to.

LaMelo and Jacen both speak highly of Mr. Wilson (pseudonym) who is both of their case managers. They share that he helps them with what he can.

LaMelo spoke about how it took time for him to realize that the program staff was there to support the participants. Due to his personal reservations, he was not as quick to allow them to assist him. Fortunately, he became more receptive of the help and support the staff wanted to offer him. Lastly, Tajunique highlighted the support did not stop just at support for them, rather, it extended to their family as well. Tajunique says

So, when my brothers became homeless, and I had to pretty much take on the role, the mom role and make sure everything was straightened out, that's when I asked Mrs. Jackson (pseudonym) to see if she can pull them in. And she did just that to make sure that they weren't homeless.
Youth Trauma

Abuse

In addition to the stigma associated with homelessness, unhoused youth are more likely than their housed peers to experience traumatic and disruptive life events. Homeless youth are disproportionately affected by abuse, poor health, mental illness, sexual exploitation, unplanned pregnancy, and substance abuse, and they are at greater risk for low academic achievement and experience higher rates of dropping out of school (Toolis & Hammack, 2015, p. 51).

A second theme that was identified through the transcripts of the 5 participants was that they have all encountered an overwhelming number of traumatic experiences. These experiences range from sexual abuse, physical abuse, mental and verbal abuse, and drug & alcohol abuse. Additionally, this trauma refers to trauma experienced due to grief and trauma from the foster homes and the foster care workers. This section will not only disclose the trauma the participants have faced, but it will also begin to further explain how and why the participants view their support systems the way they do.

During the initial recruit, participants were provided with a list of resources that they could use in the event this study would re-introduce traumatic experiences. When Tajunique received her resource list, she immediately made known that she was familiar with PAAR, a resource for victims of rape. Tajunique was a victim of sexual assault while she had been living in the system and was unable to escape that reality. She said, “Who wants to be in an environment where I have to look at my rapist every day.”
For whatever reason, those tasked with supporting her or helping her were the ones who abused her. Then, the system, meant to protect and serve missed the signs and never intervened. She said,

Then I went to another one where we got sexually assaulted. Nothing was done about it. Everybody knew in that household. And also, my caseworker knew, and it was swept underneath the rug.

The foster care workers missed the signs of sexual abuse. Tajunique mentioned that it would be beneficial if the caseworkers learned to notice the signs of sexual abuse.

Additionally, it would benefit the CYF workers if they spent time to talk with the foster youth and not just assume things are well based on what they see at first glance. Tajunique’s abuse did not stop at sexual abuse in more than one foster home, she had experienced physical abuse as well. Part of what led her to the foster care system was the fact that her mother tried to hit her with her car.

Physical abuse was a common topic during the interviews. In addition to Tajunique’s experiences of physical assault, Jacen had a similar story with his biological mother. He noted that

Right when we were transitioning to 2020, we got into a fight because she was about to burn down the kitchen and she was drinking away at the kitchen, and I was trying to turn off the oven. Like at least lower the temperature… but she ran out to me, says ‘no, you’re gonna ruin it’ and all this other crap. And then she pushed me up against the wall and she had a spoon n her hand and she was thinking it was a knife.
Jacen, who has high functioning autism, spoke of wanting to be good enough for his mother but instead he has been met with rejection from her. This is in part due to her alcohol abuse. Alcohol abuse was another form of abuse that was mentioned frequently by the participants.

DJ, while in the orphanage, was told of his mother’s abuse of alcohol. He said she would drink all the time. He was born with medical issues, and she was still drinking her life away. He eventually went into the orphanage and would later connect with her almost 8 years later.

Lydell’s experiences with alcohol led him to become what he considers a “24/7 alcoholic.” He shares that his taste for alcohol is due to what he has seen growing up.

That's a cycle. So much of my beliefs... man, every foster home, I been in about 22 Foster homes. I say 20 of ‘em was the alcoholic, or they did drugs. Ain't shit else. They was alcoholic or they did drugs. My own family was alcoholic and did drugs. I'm saying pills and shit. I was too young to notice what they was doing. But when I caught on you know I'm saying what I knew they was drinking.

Ninety percent of his foster homes did drugs or drank alcohol. This is where the conversation shifts from the abuse participants witnessed to some of the abuse the participants began to participate in.

Lydell details the first time he became really introduced to drugs himself. He had undergone a surgery that would eventually require him to take Percocet’s. His foster parent, at that time, would monitor the medication so he was not abusing it. After realizing he had only been takin the antibiotic, he discovered she had been hiding the pills for herself. Instead of confronting his foster mom, he decided to take the narcotics for himself.

Lydell began to further explain when it comes to his support and values, the only support he needs and the only things he values are weed, tobacco, and alcohol. He shares
Those are the only things I ever needed to graduate, to make it through another night, to fix my car, to pay rent, to do a double shift, to cook food, them was all I ever needed in my head. Right? In my head all I need was alcohol and some tobacco and some drugs.

LaMelo shares a similar experience with his introduction to drugs and alcohol. LaMelo said that though his granddad has been in recovery for over 33 years and does not condone smoking or drinking, thanks to the influence of his peers, he encountered marijuana for the first time. The high school football star then talks about how he then indulged in alcohol for the first time too. Comparably to Lydell, LaMelo also witnessed drug and alcohol abuse in the home. Though his grandfather was clean, his biological mother was not. His mother, who he was raised by since until he was 11 years old, has been in rehab, has done her share of pills and other drugs. LaMelo says “I don’t think I gave her enough credit… I would kill for her just to smoke weed.”

Sexual abuse, physical abuse, drug & alcohol abuse, are all factors that impact participant’s ability to build healthy relationships or trust those tasked with assisting them. Unfortunately, the abuse did not stop there. The final form of abuse mentioned was mental and verbal abuse. Abuse where things are said that negatively affect how participants see themselves.

Jacen explains

She would come home drunk, she would be all depressed, and she would like blame everything on me. She would say the cruelest things, like, “all my burdens came with you,” all this crap. And she said, while she was under the influence, she would always say that she wished she had an abortion…

Likewise, Lydell talks about his interpretation of his parents’ actions. He expresses that he is an accident.
So, I was a young baby, I wasn’t planned. I was an accident, four of us. Four accident babies! Black! I’m black and well, I’m black, my daddy black, you ain’t gonna make it far with accident babies.

**Educational Experiences**

The final theme identified from the data addresses the educational experiences of the participants while in high school and currently. Participants highlight the negative teacher perceptions of homeless and foster youth, the differences in suburban and urban educational experiences, the value of street smarts, and secondary goals and aspirations. Some of the subthemes identified connect to the participant’s ability to build relationships, whereas some of the topics are related to trauma the participants have felt.

The trauma mentioned in the previous section is what leads to students acting out, breaking rules, not turning in homework, and completely being turned off by education. Tajunique believes that it is the teacher’s responsibility to notice the signs. Recognize that students acting out is not a direct result of them being a bad kid. Instead, it is a response to the trauma that they have endured.

They didn’t notice when I act out. I wasn’t a bad kid. So, when I start acting out, nobody took heed to that. A kid don’t just act out just to act out, especially a kid like me. Teachers, instead, choose to see what they want to see. They choose to focus on what they see at face value instead of talking with the students and exploring ways to help them. Tajunique continued,

You couldn't pull me to the side of me… Are you…? Are you okay? Do you need help? Do you need… What can I help you with? No, none of that was brought up. I think still to this day. My favorite teacher will be Ashley Williams (pseudonym). She was my
teacher from second grade up until fifth and she believed in me. She didn't belittle me. She didn't tell me I couldn't do nothing. I don't know. Our bond! And I still talk to her. Like, I'm in college. She was my teacher in second grade. Y'all can do the math.

Despite her inconsistent attendance, a teacher valued Tajunique which helped her value her education. LaMelo said something similar. He said,

And the advice I could give is that you never know what that student is going through. Right? And I think today in society, a kid will react better to you motivating them, rather than putting them down and discouraging them.

Lydell also talked about needing teachers who believe in him. This is a switch he believes happened when he switched from the urban schools to the suburban schools. He shares that he values education and believes it is important. However, he was in between schools because of his acting out behavior and because he was doing drugs in the bathroom. The participants agreed that they need teachers who are not judging and assuming students do not want to learn. Instead, they understand that there are other factors that interfere with a student’s ability to just focus on education.

LaMelo describes the type of teacher he hopes more teachers would resemble. He shares

This teacher, the first day of class, you know, we're always cutting up and we're like, bro… she looks like a bitch. You know what I mean? You know. And it's crazy because by the end of senior year we had all cried over her and like I'm kind of tearing up now because that's how much of an impact she made on me but the way she really grabbed my heart was she seen the true me. She seen the true LaMelo deep down. She didn't see the class clown LaMelo. She didn't see the, you know, I don't know man, the cut up that some of the teachers did. Like, she
didn't see the LaMelo where some of my classmates’ parents would say “You stay away from that kid.”

He paints the picture of the teacher who sees through the act, who sees beyond the trouble that he causes in the classroom. The teacher saw the young man who had been in and out of homes, witnessed abuse and was a victim of drug abuse. This teacher saw him as a student.

Tajunique shared a story about her experiences with an IEP (Individualized Education Plans). She says students with IEP’s should also be seen as students and not stigmatized. She says,

Okay, so I had an IEP when I was in high school. I didn't like it. Didn't want the title. Didn't want to up and do it because they have the stigma around IEP people where you can't learn, or you can't function. You're considered slow. So, hated it... Naw, cuz like you can't put me in a box. I think different and I learned different so, I know that I'm different but that don't give you the right to sit here and tell me that I can't function like you. I might be able to teach you something.

With regards to the differences in urban schools versus suburban schools, a few of the participants (4 of the 5) have experiences at both urban and suburban schools. Lydell pointed out his main observation when attending the suburban schools: there were no metal detectors. LaMelo talked about the educational rigor was more common in the suburban setting. Coming from the urban background, he had never learned to study correctly. He did not know how to prioritize education the way he needed to in order succeed in the suburbs.

DJ, while attending a suburban school spoke of a teachers’ ability to be in tune with what their students need. He said,
Ah, yes. At my suburban school, they have always been supporting me and telling me, “Hey, you want to do this? Go for it…” By telling me not to give up! Become what you want. Sometimes they can actually help you get some extra help from different resources and placements. Like, let's say if you're homeless and my teacher would find out I was homeless, guess what she would do. She would probably spend $2,000 on my food and clothes. I'm like, ok. That's how much my teacher loves me.

The participants shared that these moments of engagement stick with them. They want to feel loved and valued and supported by their teachers and administrators.

**College Aspirations**

College was an educational experience many of the participants longed for, however, most of them referred to not having the finances to pursue it. Fortunately, the YourWay Youth Program helped them financially, or by accessing scholarships, which made their goal of college attainable.

LaMelo talked about going from having a full ride scholarship to having no financial support based on bad decisions he made while at Junior College. After bouncing between homes, and after he joined the YourWay program, LaMelo talks about carrying over bad study habits from his previous collegiate experience which led him to failing out of school.

At Warrensville Community College (WCC) I had failed a semester. And I had owed money. I wanted to continue going to classes and I don't think I did financial aid that year. Anyways, I owe $2,400. Right? I go to Mrs. Jackson and Mr. Wilson and I'm like, ‘I owe this, you know, what can I…’ Handled! I can't afford $2,400. And it's going to take me a while to pay off that $2,400. So that stops my schooling right there. Just from that. Like just from that $2,400. Because at WCC, in order to keep going to class, you have to
have a complete zero balance. You see what I'm saying? And that's not the only time they did that. It happened just this past semester

DJ also highlighted how the program helped him access funds to make his dream of college a reality. He said “so funny story, this program actually helped me apply for scholarships. They helped me fill out paperwork, and now it's already done halfway.” DJ spoke of how WCC was going to help him reach his goal of becoming a special education teacher. This was largely due to his experiences as a high school student who received special education services. The experiences that the participants had in high school are what led them to their perceptions of college. Some of the participants are currently enrolled in some form of collegiate program, while all of them mentioned their desires to pursue education.

Two participants talked about the value of being street smart and knowing how to maneuver in this world, they all expressed the significance of pursuing and receiving some sort of higher education diploma. Lydell called himself a “go-getter,” and a “self-educator.” He then said,

You know, I feel like they be pushing that college shit. But you know what it is. If you're ready for college, you ready, right now? Shit, I'm juggling 10,000 Goddamn things. We got emotional, mental, physical issues, or do it so I'm trying to take my time and see I'm a rushin.’ I like the rush. To rush to it. When it don't come out, right, I blame it on me or blame it on somebody else. Those two things don't work. We got to relax, sit back and plan. So, I plan on going to trade school because feel I could learn a good skill, make me some money, save me some money, go back to school.

Jacen spoke on having street smarts, the type of education that will help him survive in this cold world. He then shared his goals to pursue a bachelor’s and master’s degree. Currently
four of the participants attend Warrensville Community College. Tajunique plans to move on to a 4-year University and pursue a business degree. LaMelo hopes to become a schoolteacher and a football coach. Jacen wants to pursue a degree in cinematic arts, and DJ hopes to become a special educator. Each participant shared a statement like LaMelo which states,

Again, education is power. So, I know if I'm, if I'm going to be educated, and I'm going to get a degree, like a college degree, I'm gonna come up with a job that I'm going to be able to live for, you know? That college degree, whether you believe it or not, and whether it is just a piece of paper, it's going to get you your bills paid.

The participants all viewed education as an opportunity to escape their homeless reality. The thought is if a degree is obtained, a job can be obtained. If a job can be obtained, housing can be secured. What the 3 themes have shown, however, is that this is not as easily attainable as it seems.

A suggested curriculum that would benefit students, but was an outlier in the data, was mentioned by Tajunique. She talks about schools teaching self-worth and value. She shares that it is impossible to focus on school when you are concerned about how you are going to survive. She continues by saying, unfortunately, no one has time to focus on self-worth or value because as a youth in homelessness you are always on guard and are unable to spend too much time focusing on that kind of education. Yet, this is the kind of stuff she expresses is needed before students can fully commit to the curriculum enforced on them in the educational system. This will be explored a little more in chapter five.

Summary

The participants all shared their own unique perspectives of what support looks like and who they consider to be a crucial part of their support system. Participants showed their ability to
be flexible and adjust despite not having a traditional support system. Many of the participants expressed what they had hoped they would have had support from their biological parents. Some of them have lost their biological parents while others have chosen to cut their parents off.

Next, they began to find support from friendships. Though some of the participants chose to be more reserved with the friendships that they were seeking, others have found lifelong friends whom they believe are the extra support they need to accomplish their goals. All the participants agreed that the program staff have been extremely helpful and supportive since joining the program. Although participants did not receive the support they had hoped with other agencies, the consensus is that the YourWay Youth Program has been incredibly supportive.

Next, the participants discussed the trauma that has shaped the way they view the world. A lot of the trauma they have experienced has led them to where they are, yet they work daily to move past these experiences. Though they have been victims of sexual, drug, physical and mental abuse, they have taken ownership of their own healing process by not allowing these experiences to prevent them from moving on and accomplishing their goals. Some of the participants have been reserved when it came to building relationships with people. However, many have acknowledged the desire to overcome their reservations, establishing a support as they work to becoming the best version of themselves.

Finally, education has been viewed as the key to escaping homelessness. They have outlined what it is they want and need from teachers, and they have all expressed interest to pursue secondary education with the hope of positioning themselves to succeed beyond the YourWay Youth program.
Chapter 5: Discussion, Recommendations & Implications

The purpose of this research study was to investigate the lived experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth in a local housing program, and through the critical pedagogical lens, empower the youth to share their stories that could be used to promote political change. By exploring the stories of the youth in the YourWay program, the hope was to determine characteristics of this housing model that could be deemed successful. Instead, the research provided feedback and insight around what is youth in the YourWay program need from their “teachers” to begin participating in dialogical pedagogy that empowers them. This research identified the barriers youth in this local housing program faced prior to their time in this program, and their plans to overcome said barriers that led them to become homeless. With limited research on youth empowerment on transforming the conditions of homelessness, this research provides context for what unaccompanied homeless youth need to feel empowered. This research aimed to find ways teachers can learn from the testimony of UHY to improve their educational practice.

The research questions used to inform this research study were:

1. What are the lived experiences of unaccompanied youth in homelessness enrolled in the YourWay Homeless Youth Program?
2. What are the institutional constraints/barriers that position youth in homelessness?
3. What is the political role of the community/school in relation to facilitating empowerment?

After analyzing the data gathered from this study, three themes were discovered: 1. Support Systems, 2. Youth Trauma, and 3. Educational Experiences. This chapter will inspect
the results and make recommendations for policy makers, educational leaders, and other practitioners who work with this marginalized group.

Before the findings are discussed, I remind readers of my positionality when it comes to this research. I am not the disengaged investigator. Instead, I am completely embedded in this research as much as a participant as I am a researcher. The youth who participated in this study sit in the very same chair as I did over 6 years ago. Coming into this study, I was intentional about not allowing my story to influence their responses to the questions. However, my instrument was created with my story in mind. On top of the thematic analysis that occurred to find common themes, I also used triangulation to confirm the themes. The three data sources used for triangulation were participant responses, the literature, and my own personal testimony and reflection. The next section will present a discussion of the findings as well as my reflection of the findings as if I were an active participant in the study.

**Discussion of the Findings**

**Support Systems**

If there is one thing this study confirmed, it is that youth experiencing homelessness do not have the traditional sense of family when thinking of their support systems. In other words, youth from this housing program were not raised in two-parent homes, they do not have close, positive relationships with their siblings, and many of them ended up in a homeless situation due to family members (intentionally or unintentionally) not being able to meet their basic housing needs. Furthermore, most of the people the participants consider family have no blood relation to them. Tajunique mentioned that some say blood is thicker than water, while water can be thicker than blood. In the end, she says they both leak. This is a powerful statement and truly sets up the idea that youth in homelessness are strategic in who they consider family. To me, family is a
choice. Loving people is a choice. When it comes to my family, I choose to focus my attention on those people who have chosen to love me and support me when there was nothing for them to gain.

Like most of the participants, I did not have a strong relationship with my biological family. More specially, I did not have a close relationship with my moms (biological or adopted). My adopted mom gave me up when I was 17 years old, and my biological mom chose drugs and alcohol over building and maintaining a relationship with me. Unfortunately, I, like many of the other participants, did not have a relationship with our parents. Fortunately, even though trusting people was hard, we found support from other people who would fill the gaps.

Many of the participants found solace in friendships that were built. Even with two biological siblings and four adoptive siblings, I have been most supported and connected to friends who have become like family. Friendships were not always easy to build. LaMelo reminds us that he had friends, but they were conditional friends. He had friends who he connected with occasionally, but there were limitations to their friendship. Tajunique talked a lot about not being able to trust people. She shared that she never learned how to trust and that has impacted her ability to build relationships. Lydell shared that he moved so much, he struggled finding friends or maintaining friendships. What this shows is that even the strongest support systems, friends, were sometimes a challenge. The participants all agreed on the fact that friendships that they have while in the program and moving forward are designed to help them achieve their goals.

My major takeaway from this section of support systems is with so many things working against homeless youth, no one has time to be worrying about who is going to be there to support them, what friend is going to hang out with them, or whether people are going to be reliable.
YourWay Youth program participants focused on securing housing, achieving educational goals, which will be discussed later, and living a life that they consider is worthy of celebration. Tajunique summed it up when she talked about moving into her new apartment with a clean start. Those who did not have her number would not get her number. She only wants to connect to people who are going to make her better or connect her to resources that are going to help her achieve her goals. Not people who are going to be nosy and negative.

Lastly this section highlights the support system within the system. This includes the YourWay Youth program, supports from foster care providers, foster families, and other agencies that are intended to assist youth in homelessness. Due to the limited trust unaccompanied homeless youth had for their family members, they found supports from friends, but many found support from people within the system.

DJ and Tajunique both found best friends while in this program. Tajunique shared

     Actually, I met her in YourWay. It was like… I don’t know… I really don’t click with females, but I clicked with her. I was like, ‘now you’re a part of my circle.’

     And we’re still cool ‘til this day. Like we don’t even tell people we’re not sisters… That is my sister.

Jacen had similar experiences finding friends within the program.

     Friendships from within the system are beneficial because as an unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness, you do not have to explain your situation to your friend as they already have experience because they are in similar situations. However, this section is referring to the connections made with program leaders and other adults tasked with providing support. Participants referred to the Mrs. Jackson, the program director, as a major support system for them. They often mentioned that she took time to listen to them, she and her colleagues offered
financial support to assist the youth with some of their debts and others consoled them when they needed a listening ear.

What I find interesting about this is a group of unaccompanied homeless youth who struggle with trusting people are likely to trust the program staff. On one hand, this could imply that they automatically trust the program staff, yet LaMelo proved that is not always the case. LaMelo started out reserved and rejected some of the support he needed initially. It was not until he realized they want to help him did he start to allow them to do so. What stands out here is the fact that program staff members were persistent in offering support even if the youth did not want it.

Additionally, participants often shared that those providers who they connected with over the years were instrumental in connecting them with services they currently have. For instance, every participant is currently in the YourWay youth program because someone in the system recommended them to this program. For some it was their attorney, for others it was a caseworker they met when they were first introduced to the foster care system.

What is important to discuss here is the fact that this valuable program, that all participants agreed has been beneficial to their growth as a young adult and influential in getting them out of homelessness, is only accessible to those youth who had access to someone in the system who recommended them. What does this mean for the youth who do not have internal supports and cannot get a recommendation? How many youths are missing this program and the resources available through this program due to not having access to support within the system?

**Youth Trauma**

Toolis and Hammack share that homeless youth are affected by abuse (sexual and substance), mental issues, low academic achievement at a much higher rate than their housed
peers (2015). On one hand, the assumption and stigma with youth in homelessness is that all of them will have experiences with at least one of these traumatic encounters, yet nothing is being done to address the trauma. Every participant had an encounter with some sort of abuse where they were a victim of the abuse, or they engaged in the abuse.

The idea that a young person could be sexually assaulted by someone in their foster family at night but then be expected to be present and engaged in their classroom activities is disheartening. Unfortunately, however, this is the reality of what many students who are experiencing homelessness have dealt with. Tajunique talks about being sexually assaulted but having nothing done about it by her caseworkers. According to her, the caseworkers knew about it, yet either chose not to act, or felt as though their hands were tied and could not act. Whatever the case, not only was she traumatized by her abuser, but she also is traumatized by the CYF system. She is traumatized by the worker for their lack of action to put her in a safer environment, and by the overall concept of foster care, as it was in this system, she experienced this abuse.

The number of participants who are impacted by substance abuse is high. Most of the students talk about being introduced to drugs and alcohol by their family members, friends, or by associates trying to help them escape their reality. One participant spoke of the challenge of overcoming his addiction to drugs and alcohol being even more difficult since the YourWay lofts are positioned in the heart of a neighborhood that is full of drugs. Lydell questioned how program staff members expect youth who struggle with drug and alcohol abuse to get clean when they live in the back yard of drug dealers.

This brings up the conversation of location of these support services and programs. When I think of my experiences with watching my mother in recovery, she was always placed in a
halfway house or group home located in the heart of “the hood” or a neighborhood that did the opposite of promoting abstinence from drugs and alcohol.

When I lived in the lofts, I did not care about the location as much. I did not think the neighborhood had a negative impact on me. What I did not realize is I was removed from the loft and sent to a different neighborhood after I was caught drinking and exhibiting behaviors that were counterproductive to me proving I was becoming a young, mature individual. I had become a product of my environment.

The final traumatic concept was the mental abuse that youth dealt with. From youth feeling like they were an accident (Lydell) to me being told I was a mistake. That does something extremely harmful to my self-worth and impacts the way myself and the students value who we are as people (Coates & McKenzie-Mohr, 2010). Jacen talked about his mother blaming all her hardship on him being born. This type of abuse is detrimental to our ability to believe in ourselves. Whether these comments occurred while we were in the care of our families, or whether we heard these comments while in the YourWay program, it sticks with you. During our attempt to secure housing, remain employed, potentially go to school, we are facing the voice in our head that reminds us we are mistakes and accidents.

This is an additional layer of trauma added on top of stress and trauma of having house insecurities and not knowing where your supports are coming from (Toolis & Hammack, 2015). What should not be missed is this trauma impacts the way youth in homelessness sustain relationships with people. This type of trauma creates a wall with unaccompanied homeless youth making it impossible to trust service providers, teachers, and other professionals. This trauma occurs both before homelessness and as a direct result of homelessness. Coates & McKenzie-Mohr continue to say that this type of trauma can lead to substance abuse, suicidal
thoughts, and other questionably dangerous behaviors, all which have been discussed by the five participants of this study (2010).

Educational Experiences

The educational experiences of the youth in homelessness varied based on who they lived with and the type of school they went to. Support systems (and resources) were also seen as a barrier to the educational opportunity for youth in homelessness (Canfield, 2015). The same is true for the youth in the YourWay Youth program. YourWay Youth program participants have been associated with trauma, have shared their lack of support from family members, and have expressed their inability to trust adults and students alike. The significance of this is that youth get into classrooms with traumatic baggage, distrust for teachers, and no family support and get taken advantage of or have negative experiences that lead to their lack of faith in the PreK-12 educational system.

Tajunique mentioned the challenges she faced when she would come to school and get in trouble for acting out after she had left being sexually abused in her home. She spoke of how teachers did not take the time to get to know her. They did not take the time to ask her what was going on. Instead, they chose to punish her and label her as a troubled student who was unwilling to learn. She mentions it was not that she was not interested in learning. Instead, she says your mind is not geared on school. What information was she unwilling to learn? The information the teacher deemed important without consulting what it is the students needed, or without making it culturally relevant.

Lydell, who had come from city schools in the urban setting, transitioned to the suburban school and had teachers who invested in him. LaMelo and DJ had similar feelings. They all talked about having teachers who cared for them, believed in them, invested in them, and were
willing to help them accomplish their educational goals, even if it required extra effort on the teachers’ part. This is in line with Paulo Freire’s dialogic pedagogy, a form of critical pedagogy that helps education become critical, and dialogical. Critical pedagogues who exhibit dialogical pedagogy practice love-based teaching and hope-centered teaching as displayed above (Shih, 2018). This idea of dialogical pedagogy will be further explored in the recommendations and implications section.

The final discussion point talks about each participant’s will and desire to pursue post-secondary education. Despite all the trauma the participants have faced before becoming homeless and since being homeless, they all agreed that some sort of post-secondary education was necessary to help them overcome homelessness, but also to prevent them from becoming homeless again. One of the barriers to their pursuit of secondary education was the cost. Many of the participants spoke of not having money to pay for college, not being aware of financial aid or scholarships available to them, or not having the power to study to uphold their scholarships. This connects to their support systems. Part of this is because while their housed peers have support from their families, participants in this program abruptly entered adulthood and do not have the same support systems (Cheatham et al., 2021).

When I was pursuing college, my connections to my educational liaison, assigned to me by the county, is what helped me apply for scholarships and resources for youth who were in the system at some point. The major problem with this is that not all the youth knew of these opportunities or who to talk to that could help them access these resources. Access to resources was dependent upon who you knew and what they knew.

Additionally, some of the students are unsure of the direction they want to go. Tajunique wants to go to culinary school but is hoping to get a degree from Warrensville Community
College first. After that, she hopes to get an MBA. LaMelo hopes to go to a four-year university at some point, but he has recently dropped out of 1 school and has failed a semester at another. He was burdened with having to pay back the aid he lost due to failing, but fortunately for him, his support system at the YourWay Youth program was able to assist him by paying back the aid.

Lastly, the youth made mention of not knowing how to study since they have never learned appropriate study techniques. Many of the participants were in multiple schools prior to graduating high school. They never stayed in a place long enough to learn appropriate study habits. This directly impacts their ability to succeed in college since not being able to study leads to academic struggle. Though LaMelo was fortunate to receive assistance to make up for his lost financial aid, most participants do not have that luxury. That leads them to having to drop out of school or retaking a course which cost more money.

Knowing this, colleges and universities would be of better service to homeless youth pursuing higher education if they implemented a campus-based support program that addressed some of the needs of homeless youth. This idea will be investigated more in the next section.

**Implications and Recommendations**

Now that the findings have been discussed, this section will provide recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, and future researchers. Though this research only highlighted the lived experiences of 5 participants from the YourWay Youth program, the themes and information collected from their stories help inform the practice of educational institutions, the political decisions of policy makers, and next steps to further this research for future investigators. This information helps improve the overall experience for unaccompanied homeless youth who rely on schools to educate them, service providers to connect them with
resources and empower them, and policy makers to make political stances to level the playing field by making sure policies create equity for this marginalized group.

**Implications for Practice**

**Challenging Deficit Thinking**

Youth in homelessness often feel as if they are being taught by people who do not believe that they want to learn.

Because teachers’ expectations can function as self-fulfilling prophecies, they may afford fewer opportunities for learning and express less warmth and encouragement to students whom they perceive as low achieving; these teacher habits in turn impede students’ chances at school success (Wright et al., 2019, p. 298).

Wright et al. continue to share that teacher’s often blame UHY educational failures on their internal challenges, instead of recognizing the inequities they face. This type of deficit-thinking is common amongst teachers and their marginalized students. There must be professional development opportunities for teachers to challenge their deficit ideologies towards youth experiencing homelessness. It must not stop there; school administrators should be intentional about having teachers reflect on their pedagogical practices and having teachers examine if their beliefs of homeless youth are impacting the way they provide an equitable education for youth in homelessness.

**Social and Emotional Learning Curriculum**

Additionally, teachers must recognize that students in homelessness have had many traumatic experiences, including being homeless. As Tajunique said, it is not easy to bring their full self to the classroom with so many other things on their mind. Subsequently, educational institutions must begin to incorporate social and emotional learning curriculums.
Social and emotional learning (SEL) combines competence promotion and youth development frameworks. SEL can be defined as the process of acquiring core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set, and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish, and maintain positive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle interpersonal situations constructively (Durlak et al., 2011, p. 406).

Embedding SEL curriculum in schools can help teachers and students build positive relationships (Atwell et al., 2020). Some studies have shown that SEL interventions can lead to improved attitudes about self, a decrease in problematic behaviors, and improved academic performance (Durlak et al., 2011). The idea is that schools input a universal school based SEL program and in turn, students’ attitudes toward self and others improve in the short-term. In the long-term, students begin to see behavioral improvements, academic success, and improved mental health (Mahoney et al., 2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SEL Short &amp; Long-term Process</th>
<th>Inputs</th>
<th>Short-Term Outcomes</th>
<th>Long-Term Outcomes</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Universal SEL Program</td>
<td>Positive attitudes towards self and others</td>
<td>Positive behavior, Academic Success, Mental Health Improvement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the barriers of SEL identified in the research include:

- Implementation challenges due to lack of intentionality
- Lack of buy-in by teachers
- Limited resources (expensive materials and no time for personnel to commit)
- Inability to connect SEL to the daily curriculum
- Inconsistency implemented
Some of the ways to overcome these said barriers include organizing SEL around age-appropriate skills for students in PreK-12, focusing on flexible and frequent SEL strategies that go beyond the curriculum, and having teachers who are responsive the needs and experiences of their students (Bailey et al., 2019).

Incorporating SEL practices into the school culture not only informs a way in which teachers can better connect with students, but it can have an impact on whether youth succeed in schools. This study showed the trauma that the 5 participants endured, and other research shows that trauma is a regular part of the homeless experience.

Take Tajunique, for example. Tajunique, someone who identified serious trust issues both at home and school, could have benefited from intentional SEL implementation that would allow her to make positive connections with her teachers. This would have given her a space to deal with some of the trauma she had faced at home, which would have made her high school experience more positive. SEL curriculum would have taught her how to manage with her emotions and would have led to less negative behavioral episodes.

As shared in the findings section, an SEL curriculum would have allowed for behavioral improvements since her teachers would have picked up on her signs of acting out. The positive relationships built with the adults would have allowed them to intervene sooner, which could have then allowed her to handle situations different. Behavioral improvements could have led her to not only begin believing in herself, but also developing her self-esteem. Finally, with her IEP, she would have felt more empowered to set and achieve educational goals as she would have had an understanding and supportive cast supporting those goals.

This recommendation is a way schools can better focus on meeting the needs of youth in homelessness. School administrators must have a plan to evaluate the implementation of SEL
into the curriculum and the daily culture of the school. Without evaluation, teachers can fall in the trap of not implementing with fidelity or they may have uncertainty with how to do it. Regular assessment and reflection will allow teachers and students the chance to discuss what does and does not work.

**Safe Spaces for UHY in College**

After homeless youth experience their host of barriers prior to arriving to college, data shows that there are approximately 20% of college students experiencing homelessness (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). They are then met with an overwhelming number of barriers when they arrive on campus. Once they enroll, they run into financial barriers, academic challenges, and social and emotional challenges that threaten their opportunity to succeed in college. Literature has shown support for campus-based support programs for youth in homelessness (Cheatham et al., 2021). These programs include a space for youth in homelessness to discuss their educational and financial needs. Cheatham et al. (2021) highlights the Alabama REACH program as an example of what this type of space looks like.

More colleges and universities should create programs that welcomes homeless youth, offers resources, and supports (financial and academic), and has a vision centered around academic success, personal growth, and emotional development. This type of program would provide a place for youth to come together and discuss some of their challenges and brainstorm relevant supports that they need to help them succeed in college. This type of program is beneficial as it provides a safety net for an underrepresented demographic of campus youth. This type of program can be inspired by dialogical pedagogy which will not only help create a program that is essential for foster youth, but by allowing them to take part in the creation of this
type of program and setting the goals, it will empower them and increase the likelihood that they will utilize the program.

This type of program is necessary as many of the participants in college (4 of the 5) have shared not having people to talk to about their collegiate experiences, not knowing of resources available for youth experiencing homelessness while in college, and not being able to connect with a community of youth who have a similar background. A community-based program addresses all these needs.

**Implications for Theory**

Paulo Freire’s critical pedagogy highlights youth (students) as key contributors in their education and sees them as important stakeholders in their own liberation. This research looked at the lived experiences of unaccompanied homeless youth through a critical pedagogical lens. By understanding their homelessness (a form of oppression) and engaging in critical reflection (phase one of critical consciousness), the youth were able to identify ways in which they can use their reflection to critically act and make change (Seider et al., 2020).

Critical pedagogy originated in adult literacy programs in Brazil. It now informs how people develop an awareness of the power structures that limit one's accessibility to social, economic, and political opportunities to allow them to advance academically and become more critically conscious (Nelsen, 2021). This theory requires students to believe in their ability to create change (political action), but it also requires teachers to engage students in critical dialogue. A form of critical pedagogy that this promotes dialogue amongst teachers and students is dialogical pedagogy. Understanding that this research is considering teachers to be any adult who directly works with unaccompanied homeless youth, this next section will share theory implications for the teachers specifically.
Dialogic Pedagogy, a form of critical pedagogy, can only be achieved when teachers require their students to engage in critical thinking. Furthermore, teachers must believe that students can and will achieve well-being. A few principles of this form of critical pedagogy includes teachers:

- Practicing love-based teaching
- Developing humility-based teaching
- Nourishing hope-centered teaching
- Enriching humor-based teaching
- Believing that their students can achieve their calling (Shih, 2018).

Critical pedagogy is primarily concerned with providing voice to those who feel silenced, and by teachers engaging in dialogue with their students, critical consciousness can begin taking place. Lastly, critical pedagogy encourages empowerment by teaching students how they can have political influence (Nelsen, 2021).

Teachers, adults working with homeless youth, can learn from students’ hunger to share their voice in this study. Students shared there were few opportunities to share their stories, or they were concerned nothing would be done about their experiences. By engaging in critical pedagogy, teachers can capitalize on the opportunity to empower unaccompanied homeless youth.

Implications for Policy

Lack of McKinney Vento Act Awareness

The data collected revealed many discoveries. After the analysis was done, what no participant mentioned were the implications of the McKinney-Vento Act. Each participant was homeless while in high school, yet none of them talked about the MVA. The McKinney Vento
Act is a federal law that provides supports, protections, and funding for youth experiencing homelessness (Atwell et al., 2020). Part of why the participants could have failed to mention it is because some of them were in between foster homes, and under the ESSA reauthorization of 2015, students awaiting placement no longer qualified for MVA services and supports. This could also be because local education associations have not assigned a homeless liaison, or the role is assigned to employees with other tasks, making it hard for liaisons to meet the needs of their youth experiencing homelessness (Wilkins et al., 2016).

In the event students did not know of MVA due to their transitioning phase in the foster-care system, local school districts should implement a policy that allows students to receive supports and funding as if they were MVA students. One local school district in PA has a policy that supports students awaiting placement (which was the bulk of the participants at one point before entering the YourWay Youth program) which allows them to receive the same benefits students considered homeless receive. This would allow students to receive free school lunch, access to transportation, free tutoring services and other benefits offered through MVA. This is a practice that offers a solution to a policy that was changed and negatively impacted students who are in and out of foster care. Under ESSA, students awaiting placement do not qualify as homeless, therefore would not get the supports under MVA. By creating a policy like this, it would allow students to still receive supports.

If students were unaware of the MVA due to the lack of implementation of the policy, this brings forth a different issue. Being that there is no evaluation of MVA being implemented at the local or state level, there appears to be no accountability. At the federal level, there needs to be a way for the government to create an evaluation tool that measures the effectiveness of MVA implementation for those receiving funding and those not receiving funding.
Many of the examples that follow demonstrate what can be achieved when districts implement the law robustly or, in some cases, go above and beyond the letter of the law to embrace the spirit of the law. It is important that districts and schools across the nation take these bright spots of comprehensive and vigorous McKinney-Vento implementation to heart to ensure their students receive the full rights and opportunities afforded to them under law (Atwell et al., 2020).

**Tuition Waivers for Homeless Youth**

The state of Pennsylvania passed House Bill 1615, The *Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver Program* in 2019 ("Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver Program," 2019; Schroeder, 2019). This bill allows for foster youth to attend a private or public college/university in the state of Pennsylvania for free. This bill was passed to allow students in foster care to experience college without the financial burden. A lot of the participants shared that they had financial challenges in school for several reasons.

A bill like this works would benefit not only foster youth, but youth in homelessness as well. For someone like me, I would have qualified for this tuition waiver since I had been a foster youth prior to my 18th birthday and became homeless afterwards. However, for youth who became homeless after 18, but were not in the foster care system, they would not have access to this waiver. My recommendation would be for policy makers to expand the qualification requirements to include youth who are homeless, regardless of their foster care status. This would eliminate the financial burden college brings on homeless youth, just as it eliminates the burden for foster youth.
Implications for Future Research

Research on the lived experiences of youth in homelessness is scarce and, in some cases, non-existent. A lot of the research found talks about people’s perceptions of homeless youth, but few researchers have explored the experiences of the youth from their perspective. Change efforts are being made to improve homeless youth’s experiences, but no one has asked the youth what they need. Critical pedagogy encourages the teacher, in this case, the researcher, to engage in critical dialogue with the youth. This will allow the researcher the opportunity to empower the youth they are learning from. It then allows the youth to take part in the change they are hoping the research will inspire.

A major limitation with this study is the youth who participated were all from the same program. Future researchers should further this study with youth from other programs. Researchers could also look at unaccompanied homeless youth who do not have access to homeless programs. The research should include the lived experiences of youth experiencing homelessness to learn of how their experiences differ or are similar to the participants in this study. Literature highlights the importance of evaluating and assessing the effectiveness of the different housing models available for youths in homelessness (Pierce et al., 2018; Rashid, 2004; Semborski et al., 2020).

More research is needed to determine which housing models should be replicated that are meeting the needs of youth in homelessness. Additional research could be done to examine other housing models that are created with youth voice. Furthermore, more research is needed to investigate what schools and communities are doing to empower youth experiencing homelessness. Implications from this study will make distinct connections between the lived experiences of youth experiencing homelessness to inform community resources, such as
housing models, and educational institutions and argue that community organizations and schools can work together to best meet the needs of youth.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research critically investigated the lived experiences of youth in a local housing program aimed at creating independent and self-sufficient youth. This study confirmed that youth in homelessness do not have the traditional support systems (from family in the traditional sense). Due to the trauma that they have endured from their initial support systems, they have struggled trusting adults and professionals tasked with helping them. The youth in this study, contrary to trendy belief, have goals and aspirations to pursue secondary education as many of them believe it is their key to addressing their housing insecurities.

Youth must be included in the change that directly impacts them. For them to trust the adults working with them, adults must engage them in critical reflection and dialogical pedagogy. By doing this, students can move from critical reflection to political action. They will become primary stakeholders in the change they aspire to see. This study contributes to educational practitioners both PreK-12 and secondary education. It also contributes to policy makers and critical pedagogues. In the end, this study reminds us of what can be done when youth are seen as stakeholders and teachers move beyond the banking model of education and work towards liberation.
References


Fostering Independence Tuition Waiver Program, HB 1615 (2019).


Kwartler, T. J. (1993). *Providing Field Experiences for Early Childhood Preservice Teachers with Homeless Children and/or Mothers in an Urban Setting*.


*MyPlace Youth Programs*. Action Housing Inc. https://actionhousing.org/our-services/myplace-youth-program/


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Appendix A

A Critical Study of Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness in a Local Housing Program

Invitation Email

Greetings,
Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study to learn more about your experiences with the YourWay Youth program (pseudonym). Please respond to this email confirming your participation and include 3 days/times you will be available to participate in the interview (evening and weekend times are preferred).

Your participation in this study will be kept confidential. Physical research data will be stored in secured folder on my desktop that only I will have access to. Although this data will be published and presented in meetings and/or at conferences, your name and identifying information will not be revealed. You will have the opportunity to select a pseudonym at the conclusion of the interview.

Prior to our schedule interview you will be asked to complete a consent form. This signed form will give me permission to use the information obtained for the purpose of the study. You may withdraw your consent and participation at any time. There are no personal benefits or consequences for participating or declining to participate in this research study. However, there is the potential risk of describing personal and sensitive information that might cause you to want to seek counsel/support. A list of counselors or therapists available through the YourWay program and other organizations will be provided. Additionally, your participation benefits this study by:

1. helping housing programs learn of the experiences of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness and,
2. acknowledging the necessary supports and resources available to best serve unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

This study will interview 5-7 participants total between the ages of 18-24. Furthermore, eligible participants will have at least 6 months of program experience. Please respond to this email in a timely manner to confirm your participation in this study. Please be sure to complete the demographic survey as well. This survey will be used to confirm your eligibility to partake in this study.

If you do not meet the qualifications of this study, but would still like to participate, please forward this email to anyone who you believe would meet this criterion for this study.

Thanks in advance for your participation,

Michael J. Warren
Doctoral Candidate, 2022
Educational Leadership
Duquesne University
Appendix B

A Critical Study of Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness in a Local Housing Program

Interview Questions

1. What challenges/barriers led you to this program?

2. How does being homeless impact your ability to build relationships with others?

3. How do you make sense of your support systems (e.g., family, staff members, friends, etc.) inside and outside of the program?

4. How do you experience, interact, or connect with your family members? (If there is no connection, please explain why not.)

5. How does what the program offers benefit your educational needs?

6. What do you need to occur to prevent you from becoming homeless again?

7. During your time in this program, how have you felt supported?

8. After leaving this program, how will you know you have become successful?

9. Generally speaking, what are some goals you hope to accomplish as a member of this program?

10. How do you make sense of the role of education impacting (or not impacting) your experience of homelessness?

11. Given your state of homelessness, what are your perceptions of education advancing or hindering your success in life?
Appendix C

A Critical Study of Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness in a Local Housing Program

Demographic Questionnaire
Please complete the questionnaire below and return it to Mrs. Sharon Langford, the YourWay Program Director, for consideration into this research study regarding the experiences of unaccompanied youth in homelessness.

Name:
Chosen Pseudonym:
Gender/Sex:
Sexual Orientation:
Age:
Time in the program:
  - 1-5 months
  - 6-9 months
  - 9-12 months
  - 12-24 months (about 2 years)

Highest Level of Education:
  - High School Diploma
  - GED
  - Did not complete High School
  - Some College
  - College Degree
  - Graduate Degree

Race:
  - Asian/Asian American/East Asian
  - Bi-Racial
  - Black/African American
  - Latino/Latina/Latinx
  - Multi-Racial
  - Native American
  - White/Caucasian
  - Other ____________________
Appendix D

Participant

RELEASE OF INFORMATION

This form authorizes the Principal Investigator to release audio recordings, notes of observations and interviews for the purpose of transcription.

I am committed to keeping your information as confidential as possible. Any identifying information has already been removed from the mentioned sources. Please note, the transcriptionists are prohibited from sharing confidential information or using confidential information from the study for personal intent. The transcriptionists are also required to destroy or otherwise discard information in a secure manner.

By signing the document below, you grant us permission to release audio recordings, notes of observations and interviews for the purpose of transcription.

Name: ______________________________________________
Signature: ____________________________________________
Date: ______________________________________________
Appendix E

COVID-19 Health Screen Questionnaire

Name: 
Date: 

1. Have you been exposed to anyone with a confirmed positive COVID-19 test in the last 14 days (about 2 weeks)? YES or NO (Circle One) 
2. Have you been out of the country in the last 14 days (about 2 weeks)? YES or NO (Circle One) 
3. Have you had a confirmed positive COVID-19 test in the past 14 days (about 2 weeks)? YES or NO (Circle One) 
4. Are you currently experiencing any of the following symptoms?

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<th>NO</th>
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<tr>
<td>Cough</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shortness of Breath</td>
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<td>Sore Throat</td>
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<td>Headache</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nausea/Vomiting</td>
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</table>

5. Current Temperature: ________________

I hereby confirm that the above information is true and accurate. 
Participant Signature: ___________________________
Appendix F

List of Resources

Highmark Caring Place
www.highmarkcaringplace.com
1-888-224-4763

Pittsburgh Action Against Rape (PAAR)
www.paar.net
1-866-363-7273

MyPlace Youth Program*
412-281-2102

TCV Community Services
www.tcv.net
412-351-0222

resolve Crisis Services
www.upmc.com/services/behavioral-health/resolve-crisis-services
1-888-796-8226
333 N Braddock Ave
Pittsburgh, PA 14208
(walk-in center)

Peer Supported Advocacy Network (PSAN) Warmline
www.peer-support.org
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*Contact your case manager or the program director.
TITLE:

A Critical Study of Unaccompanied Youth Experiencing Homelessness in a Local Housing Program

INVESTIGATOR:

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ADVISOR:

Darius Prier, Ed.D.

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:

This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in the School of Education at Duquesne University

STUDY OVERVIEW:

This study aims to highlight the power of youth voice as a key part of the research to determine the success of the current housing program. Additionally, this study plans to develop comprehension for what unaccompanied homeless youth in the YourWay program need to successfully overcome the many barriers of homelessness.

PURPOSE:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is investigating the experiences of unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness in the YourWay (pseudonym) Youth program.

In order to qualify for participation, you must:

- be a current YourWay Youth program resident
- have been a resident in the program for at least 6 months
PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:

If you provide your consent to participate, you will be asked to

- participate in 1 60-minute interview at the Dyson Avenue Suites answering questions centered around the following topics:
  - relationships
  - family
  - your idea of success
  - homelessness to you
  - what you need from the program

- complete 1 survey identifying who you are (age, race, educational background, etc.)

- participate in 1 30-minute follow up meeting to confirm the accuracy of the collected data

For the interview process, you will meet with the principal investigator 1-on-1 for approximately 60 minutes. In addition, you will be asked to allow me to interview you. The interviews will be recorded using an audio device and transcribed. Video recording will only occur if the interviews are transitioned to a virtual setting due to COVID-19 protocols. All interviews will occur in the conference room of the Dyson Avenue Suites building.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

Experiencing homelessness as a youth presents emotional and traumatic feelings/responses. The potential risks include describing personal and sensitive information that might cause you, the participant, to want to seek counsel/support. The benefits of participating in this study include helping your local housing program (YourWay Youth Program) learn of your specific experiences regarding homelessness, and it allows you to identify supports and resources available to best serve unaccompanied youth experiencing homelessness.

COMPENSATION:

There will be no compensation for participating in this study, and there is no cost for you to participate in this research project.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study, and any identifiable personal information you provide, will be kept confidential to every extent possible, and will be destroyed 1 year after the data collection is completed. Your name will never appear on any survey or research instruments, only the pseudonym chosen by you will be included (this includes the transcriptions). All written and electronic forms and study materials will be kept secure on a password protected computer only accessible by the primary investigator (Michael Warren). Any video and/or audio will be destroyed 1 year after the data collection is completed as well. In addition, any publications or presentations about this research will only use data that is combined with all subjects; therefore, no one will be able to determine how you responded.
RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to start or continue this study. You can withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence by:
- emailing the investigator your intent to withdraw within 2 weeks of the data collection process.
- expressing your intent to withdraw at the conclusion of the interview
Once you have expressed your intent to withdraw, all data collected from your interview or survey will be destroyed immediately from all platforms (digital or hardcopy).

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this study will be provided to at no cost. You may request this summary by contacting the researchers and requesting it. The information provided to you will not be your individual responses, but rather a summary of what was discovered during the research project as a whole.

FUTURE USE OF DATA:

Any information collected that can identify you will have the identifiers removed and be kept for use in future related studies, and/or provided to other researchers. This data might be used in the future to further the conversation of youth experiencing homelessness, or this data may be used to identify what youth in local housing programs are learning while in the government funded program. The qualitative responses may be used in a meta-analysis, or this data may be extracted and adapted by the investigator to create educational articles meant for academic journals.

COVID-19 CONSIDERATIONS

I understand that the researcher(s) running this study have put in place the following guidelines to address concerns related to COVID-19:

- mandatory mask wearing during the duration of the interview.
- mandatory temperature check upon entering the interview room.
- completion of the COVID-19 health screen questionnaire.
- virtual (zoom) option in the event the participant has a fever or is exhibiting any other symptoms of COVID-19
  - the interview will be rescheduled for 24 hours later
  - in person interview can be rescheduled if participant is symptom free for 72 hours (about 3 days).
VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read this informed consent form and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, for any reason without any consequences. I also consent to be audio-recorded (and video-recorded if virtual). Based on this, I certify I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Michael J. Warren or Dr. Darius Prier via email at warrenm1@duq.edu, prierd@duq.edu, or by phone at (412)608-9154. If I have any questions regarding my rights and protections as a subject in this study, I can contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 412.396.1886 or at irb@duq.edu.

___________________________________ __________________  
Participant’s Signature Date

___________________________________ __________________  
Researcher’s Signature Date