Parental perspectives on how homelessness affects children's access and participation in education in an Irish context

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Aim(s): Ireland is experiencing unprecedented levels of homelessness with 14,760 people, including 4,561 children living in emergency accommodation. School principals, teachers, public health nurses, social workers and paediatricians have reported the devastating impact of homelessness on children's physical health, psychological wellbeing, and educational development. This study explores parental perspectives on the impact that homelessness has had on children's right to access and participate in education

Method: Nineteen parents participated in semi-structured interviews to explore parental perspectives on how the family's experience of homelessness affected their child's access and participation in education.

Findings: The analysis suggests that parents believe their children experienced challenges in fully participating in education due to the impact that homelessness had on their health, wellbeing, relationships and educational aspirations.

Limitations: This was a small-scale study that explored parental perspectives of children's educational experiences. There is a need for sensitive and ethical research that considers children's voice concerning their experiences of homelessness.

Conclusions: The findings contribute to an important body of research that considers the deleterious impact of homelessness on children's health, wellbeing and development. It is proposed that psychologists working for the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) are uniquely positioned to inform and lead a coordinated response to assist schools in identifying, responding to and monitoring the learning and social-emotional needs of a growing cohort of children experiencing homelessness in Ireland.

Keywords: Family homelessness; educational access; parent perspectives; emergency accommodation.

Introduction

OVER THE LAST decade, homelessness levels in the UK, Europe, New Zealand, and other 'high-income countries' have increased steadily, partly due to economic measures that impact the accessibility and affordability of housing (Sen et al., 2022; Tu et al., 2024). In Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, over two million people are experiencing homelessness, with England, Czechia, France, Ireland and Germany reporting the highest levels, with over 25 people living rough or staying in emergency accommodation or accommodation for the homeless per 10,000 people (OECD, 2024). A 2024 report by The Housing Commission indicates that Ireland has a 'housing deficit of between 212,500 and 256,000 homes' (Housing Commission, 2024, p. 28) due to very low housing output since the economic crash in 2008. In Ireland, a person or family is considered to be homeless if 'there is no accommodation available that, in the opinion of the local authority, you and any other person who normally lives with you…can reasonably occupy or remain in occupation of' (Government of Ireland, 1988. Para. 2). Ireland is currently experiencing unprecedented levels of homelessness, with

14,760 people living in emergency accommodation, of which 4,561 are children. Children are the largest demographic group experiencing homelessness, and children and their families account for 54% of those living in emergency accommodation (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2024). Since 2014, the number of children living with their families in emergency accommodation has increased from 880 children in December 2014 to a record 4,561 children in September 2024. Infants and young children aged birth to four years are the age largest cohort experiencing homelessness, accounting for 11% of all homeless people (Central Statistics Office (CSO), 2022). The official homelessness figures do not account for thousands of adults and children experiencing insecure housing, living 'doubled-up' with family and friends, or those in precarious rental accommodation.

Family homelessness is a significant social and public health issue. While families are less likely to 'sleep rough', many find themselves in emergency accommodation in hotels, hostels and shelters that are inadequate and unsuitable for the needs of families and children (Baptista et al., 2022; Murran & Brady, 2023). Families eligible for emergency accommodation can be placed in hotels, refuges, and supported accommodation, known as 'family hubs'. This accommodation is often far from their local communities, support networks and children's schools and families are faced with choosing between long journeys to school or multiple school moves. In 2019, the Irish Primary Principals' Network (IPPN) surveyed over 1000 school principals and reported that 27% of primary schools provide educational services for children living in homeless accommodation. Teachers reported that homeless children are suffering from 'poor physical and mental wellbeing, low self-esteem, exhaustion and feelings of isolation' that impact school attendance, engagement, and participation (Irish Primary Principals' Network, 2019). Across Ireland, school principals, teachers, public health nurses, social workers and paediatricians have reported the negative effects of homelessness on children's physical health, psychological wellbeing, and educational development (McGuire, 2018; Irish Primary Principals' Network, 2019; Jones, 2019).

International research spanning the last thirty years has documented the deleterious effect of housing insecurity and homelessness on children's social and emotional wellbeing, health, development and educational experiences. Much of the research emanates from the United States, with more recent studies documenting the effects of child and family homelessness in the United Kingdom, Australia and Europe. A 2008 review of published research conducted in the United States considered the impact of homelessness on children's health, development, and educational achievement and suggests that children experiencing homelessness are exposed to an increased risk of poor physical health, mental wellbeing and academic underperformance (Buckner, 2008). While a 'homelessness-specific' effect was not identified, the risks were comparable to children living in poverty who experienced multiple school moves throughout their education (Buckner, 2008, p.732). A more recent critical review of 21 international publications found that homelessness negatively impacts children's development due to various levels of trauma and a range of adversities that directly and indirectly impact their health and wellbeing (Murran & Brady, 2023). The review found that experiences of homelessness were associated with reduced social networks, increased school mobility, behavioural challenges and mental health concerns that negatively impacted children's development. As in other studies, the severity of the impact appears to be influenced by time spent in insecure housing, persistent experiences of poverty, and reduced access to support and services due to homelessness (Cutuli et al., 2013; Masten, 2012).

Impact on children's social-emotional development and wellbeing

Existing research on child homelessness includes both quantitative and qualitative studies that explore how child and family homelessness adversely affects children's mental health, social-emotional development and wellbeing. Quantitative studies using longitudinal health data and mental health screening tools indicate that children living in homeless accommodation are significantly more likely to require clinical evaluation for emotional and behavioural problems, meet thresholds for mental health referral, and experience higher rates of depression (Ziesemer et al., 1994; Zima et al., 1994). Several qualitative studies explore the experiences and perspectives of families living in homeless accommodation, providing insights into children's feelings of shame and embarrassment that can result in withdrawal from their peers and poor mental health (Buckner et al., 2001; Keogh et al., 2006; Moore & McArthur, 2011). Begg et al. (2017) interviewed 15 homeless African-American children about their school experiences and future educational aspirations. The study found that homeless children struggled to manage feelings of sadness, anger, and anxiety about leaving their previous homes, school settings, and friends. Children described their fears that others would judge or treat them differently and that they would struggle to become part of existing social groups in their new schools.

While studies suggest that the majority of homeless children do not demonstrate mental health difficulties, they are a group at significant risk of difficulty compared to their same-aged peers (Haskett et al., 2016; Masten et al., 1997; Zima et al., 1997). However, it is important to note that the experience of homelessness often occurs alongside other experiences of trauma and adversity, not least the effects of poverty, loss of routine and predictability, family stress and poor living conditions that harm children's mental health and wellbeing (Haskett et al., 2016; Keogh et al., 2006; Murran & Brady, 2023). Qualitative studies exploring the impact of homelessness on children's behaviour, social-emotional adjustment and peer relationships in school settings highlight the important role of teachers and support services in identifying and responding to the individual needs of children through awareness, advocacy and relationship-building and supportive educational environments (Chow et al., 2015; Clemens et al., 2018).

Family homelessness and children's physical health and development

Family homelessness is associated with an increased risk of prematurity, low birth weight, respiratory illness, infectious diseases, poor nutrition, developmental delay and emergency admission to the hospital (Kreider-Letterman & Schmelzer, 2021; O' Brien et al., 2022). Experiences of homelessness and living in temporary accommodation correlate with other mitigating life factors, including food poverty (Share & Hennessy, 2017) and reduced access to adequate health services (Biggar, 2001; Buckner et al., 2001; Masten et al., 1997). Qualitative studies in an Irish context indicate that children's eating habits were affected by homelessness, with parents struggling to provide children with adequate nutrition because of limited financial resources, a lack of cooking and storage facilities as well as significant time spent travelling to and from the children's educational provision (Share & Hennessy, 2017). Multiple studies indicate that children and families living in temporary and emergency accommodation have health vulnerabilities as a result of poor living conditions, and this is further exacerbated by reduced access to medical and dental services, resulting in a greater reliance on emergency admission for medical care (Heathcote et al., 2021; Kreider-Letterman & Schmelzer, 2021; O' Brien et al., 2022; Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, 2019).

Risks to educational experience and school success

The available evidence suggests that children experiencing homelessness are subject to multiple stressors and a 'continuum of risk' (Masten et al., 2015, p. 317) that can negatively impact their development, as well as their access and participation in education. Children and young people living in temporary and insecure accommodation can experience difficulty in attending and participating in school life and extra-curricular activities as a result of poor health, social and emotional difficulties and reduced school attendance as a result of homelessness (Anglin, 1998; Biggar, 2001; Havlik et al., 2014). Children experience fluctuations in academic attainment, difficulty completing homework, poor school attendance, difficulty concentrating and a lack of continuity in learning due to high levels of mobility across multiple school placements resulting from homelessness (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Grothaus et al., 2011; Murran & Brady, 2023). Research from the United States indicates that children living in sheltered accommodation are more likely to underperform on standardised measures of educational attainment and experience higher levels of grade retention than their housed counterparts (Bassuk & Rubin, 1987; Masten et al., 1997; Zima et al., 1994). Across several qualitative studies, parents report that children's school grades, achievements and academic aspirations decreased when living in temporary and emergency accommodations (Begg et al., 2017; Grothaus et al., 2011; Keogh et al., 2006). While research evidences the negative impact of homelessness on children's educational access and participation, studies exploring children's experiences highlight the important role that schools and teachers have in providing security and predictability and a stable and familiar place for children (Cutuli et al., 2013; Keogh et al., 2006; Moore & McArthur, 2011). Teachers, school counsellors and homeless support teams indicate a need for specific academic and learning support for children experiencing homelessness (Chow et al., 2015;

Clemens et al., 2018; Havlik et al., 2014). For children experiencing homelessness, there appear to be mediating factors that can support children: a positive school climate (Moore et al., 2018), supportive relationships (Clemens et al., 2018), parental involvement (Masten, 2012) and social competence (Haskett et al., 2016). A qualitative study of 25 children living in homeless accommodation in Australia found that children valued going to school because it offered stability and provided normality where they could learn and socialise with their peers in a place of safety (Moore & McArthur, 2011). Gilligan (1998) argues that positive schooling experiences can provide protective factors and contribute to children's resilience through routines and rituals that provide a safe base for children during periods of uncertainty and upheaval for families. Supportive schools can respond to children's learning and social-emotional needs and basic survival needs such as hunger and exhaustion (Canfield, 2014; Clemens et al., 2018). However, research with teachers and school counsellors indicates that schools require advice, support and assistance to respond to the needs of homeless children within their settings and broader school systems; this includes awareness and understanding of children's circumstances, training on approaches to support learning and social-emotional wellbeing, as well as access to information and support services that assist with school transport, food and clothing (Grothaus et al., 2011; Havlik et al., 2014).

This paper draws on findings from the HomeWorks Study (Scanlon & McKenna, 2018), commissioned by the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA). This qualitative study explored parent and teacher perspectives on how homelessness impacted children's educational access and participation. This paper reports on one aspect of the report, the parental perspectives of how experiences of homelessness impacted their children's school experience and participation in education.

Methodology

This article reports on parental perspectives of their child's educational access and participation while the family were experiencing homelessness. The research used qualitative methods grounded in a bio-ecological approach that considers children's unique context and the impact and influence of multiple environmental and social factors on their lives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Semi-structured interviews were used to explore parental perspectives, focusing on their child's access to education and participation within their school community while living in homeless accommodation. The study commenced in June 2017 and collected data from July 2017 to December 2017.

Participants

A purposeful sampling approach was employed, with the research team seeking participation from parents with children aged three months to 18 years living in emergency accommodation. The recruitment of families was supported by organisations and services that provide emergency homeless accommodation, as well as schools and early childhood settings that make provisions for children experiencing homelessness. A total of 20 parents from 19 families participated in the study. The families had 38 dependent children, 19 girls and 19 boys, aged five months to 17 years. The study explored the educational-related experiences of 36 children aged two to 15 years enrolled in school or early childhood settings. At the time of the interviews, four families lived in hotels or bed and breakfast accommodations; two families lived in apartments provided as temporary emergency accommodation; and twelve families were housed in supported accommodation (women's refuge or family hubs). One family was housed during the data collection period; prior to this, the mother and her five children had been living in a family hub for five months.

Procedure

Parents were invited to participate in a semi-structured, in-person interview at a time and place selected by participants. Fourteen interviews took place in a private room at the homeless accommodation sites, the remainder in a private room (family or meeting room) at their child's school or educational setting. Interviews typically lasted 30 to 60 minutes, with three lasting over 90 minutes.

An educational psychologist and a counselling psychologist with expertise in rights-based approaches to inclusion and educational disadvantage developed the semi-structured questionnaire. Parents were asked to provide demographic information, family composition details, and their pathway to living in emergency accommodation. Timelines were used to gain an understanding of the transition experienced by parents and children, from having a home of their own to living in emergency and temporary accommodation. Parents were asked to describe a 'typical' school day while living in homeless accommodation, providing details on their child's daily routines, including morning and bedtime routines, travel times, mealtimes, space and time for homework and opportunities for rest and relaxation. Parents were asked to reflect on their child's attendance, attitudes to school and learning, relationships with school staff and same-aged peers, participation and involvement in extracurricular activities, and educational aspirations. Parents were also asked to describe the supports and systems that schools and child-care settings could offer to support the educational experience of children experiencing homelessness.

Data analysis

The analysis was guided by Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) framework (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This approach allows for careful consideration of participants' perspectives on their child's experiences while providing scope to consider the influence and interpretation

of the research team. The interviews were digitally recorded and manually transcribed. There were over 30 hours of recordings, so QDA Miner software was used to manage the transcripts and support initial coding. The thematic analysis allowed for careful consideration of participants' perspectives on their child's experiences while providing scope to consider the influence and interpretation of the researcher and research team. The analysis adhered to a six-phase approach:

1. The interviewer digitally recorded and manually transcribed the interviews. Once the recordings had been transcribed, they were re-read while listening to the original recordings and considered alongside any field notes and researcher reflections made during data collection. Notes and comments were added at this stage.

2. Following familiarisation with the full data set, the interviewer then commenced line-by-line 'coding', generating initial codes using keywords and comments that reflected participants' stories and perspectives on their children's experiences. This process allowed for overlapping and multiple codes relating to the same comment/line.

3. The two researchers considered the initial codes and comments, deciding on agreed codes for items with multiple or overlapping codes. The researchers noted that the initial codes were aligned with and in keeping with five broad themes: physiological needs, routine and predictability, friendship and belonging, relationships with teachers, and educational aspirations.

4. Both researchers jointly agreed upon and applied the five overarching themes and relevant subthemes and codes to four interviews. The QDA Miner software allowed for reviewing the code and theme frequency and text retrieval to consider distinctions and differences between the key themes and selecting key quotes that captured participant perspectives.

5. The agreed codes and themes were then applied to the full data set, with secondary coding across the different types of educational provision (early childhood settings, primary schools, and secondary schools).

6. Finally, the coded and categorised text, quotations and researcher comments were exported to Microsoft Excel to allow for final collation and write-up findings.

Ethical considerations

Research ethics approval was obtained from the DCU Research Ethics Committee; in devising the questions and conducting the interviews, consideration was given to protecting participants' physical, social, and psychological wellbeing. Both researchers are psychologists with experience, awareness, and sensitivity to participant experiences of poverty, exclusion, and trauma. Parents were informed that the Children's Rights Alliance commissioned the study, and the primary purpose was to advocate for children's right to education. The participant information form and information meetings prior to the commencement of the study introduced the research team and clarified the researchers' position that child and family homelessness results from systemic issues of inadequate housing supply. The team made it clear that the focus of the study was parental perspectives and experiences of their child's educational participation rather than the family's individual and personal circumstances. The interview approach was flexible, and the questions and prompts were developed so as not to traumatise further or stigmatise parents. Within the ethical principles of research with vulnerable populations, an 'ethics as process' approach (Cutcliffe & Ramcharan, 2002) was adopted and remained central to the methodological approach throughout the research. This approach allowed participants to negotiate consent to participate, take breaks when and where required, and withdraw from the interview at any stage. This process also meant that parents were given as much time as they wanted to share their experiences and perspectives, with some interviews lasting up to 90 minutes. The ethical processes extended

to the research team, with careful attention to reflexivity, physical and emotional safety, and ethical reflection. This was supported through a buddy system for check-in before and after each interview, research journalling and ongoing peer-to-peer debriefing throughout data collection, analysis, and report writing (Bowtell et al., 2013).

Analysis

The study aimed to consider parental perspectives on their children's educational access and participation while experiencing homelessness. Parental responses were dynamic and complex, varying according to their children's age, developmental stage, and educational setting. Parents explained, that from their perspective, their children experienced multiple challenges regarding educational access and participation while living in emergency accommodation. These were categorised into five broad thematic areas: (1) physiological needs, (2) security, routine and predictability, (3) friendship, trust and belonging, (4) relationships with teachers and school staff and (5) attitudes to school and educational aspirations.

Children's physical health, development and wellbeing

A key theme across the interviews was that parents believed that living in emergency accommodation disrupted and negatively impacted children's eating habits, sleep routines, development, and health, which influenced children's school attendance, engagement in learning and participation in school life. Parents described challenges in providing children with adequate space and facilities for rest, sleep, and play, as well as the difficulty in providing children with sufficient amounts of nutritious food due to low income and a lack of cooking and storage facilities in emergency accommodation. Parents explained that their children were often hungry due to significant time spent travelling from their temporary accommodation to the children's school.

'They have a breakfast morning, but because we have to get the bus, she was missing the breakfast so I'm worried sick about her, she's in school all morning with nothing in her stomach, do you know what I mean? It is just horrible for her, it really is.' (Margaret).

'I think they're cranky now in the day, you know when you get into school, they're just cranky with hunger and exhaustion. How can they listen and play with their friends when they are like that?' (Elizabeth)

Families reported difficulty establishing and maintaining children's bedtime routines due to noise, insufficient space, bed-sharing and disrupted routines while living in emergency accommodation. Parents discussed how they believed poor sleep impacted their children's learning and educational participation. Three parents explained that they woke their children at 5.30am to allow access to a communal bathroom and travel time to their school. Children were said to be exhausted in school, often sleeping on the bus or requiring rest during the day. Three parents of primary school children had been informed by school staff that their child had fallen asleep in school.

'Some days when I send him into school he could be in different humours and when I'm collecting him from school, a few times the teacher says to me that he's falling asleep in school because he's so tired.' (Sally)

Almost all parents described how their children experienced frequent school absences and poor attendance arising from poor health, illness, and infectious diseases, which they attributed to cramped living conditions, poor diet, long journeys to schools and the stress of being homeless. One mother could not access GP care due to the family's change in address; she believed that this resulted in prolonged illness and additional school absences.

'He always had coughs and colds; they picked up everything in the hotel. So, like, every week there was a new sickness in the hotel, like somebody's child had chicken pox and the whole hotel would get it. There was hand, foot and mouth, and there was loads of head lice going around; it was really bad.' (Susan)

Two children were recorded as having significant physical disabilities requiring a wheelchair and ongoing medical care, while four other children had additional needs for which they received therapeutic intervention outside school. Parents explained that medical appointments resulted in additional days' absence from school, owing to the distance between the homeless accommodation, the school, and the therapeutic/medical settings. All parents within the study recognised that children's regular school attendance and meaningful educational progress were impeded by low energy, fatigue, and illness resulting from a lack of adequate food, rest, and access to health services.

Disruption of children's security, routine and predictability

The experience of homelessness and living in emergency accommodation was seen to disrupt family life and remove children from their local communities. Parents explained that loss of space, privacy and personal belongings had resulted in distress and discomfort for their children. Many children were said to have experienced difficulty changing their daily and school routines as a result of living in emergency accommodation. Despite this, parents generally described their children's educational setting as a source of comfort, where predictable and consistent routines and responsive teachers offered children a sense of stability and continuity amid the uncertainty of family homelessness.

'It's a good school and it's basically been the only stability in the last year like and she has friends there and she's actually really, really settled, she loves her teacher.' (Veronica)

'I think if I took him out of that school and put him somewhere else, he'd be completely lost. I think the school is so important. Work keeps me grounded; the school keeps him grounded.' (Caitriona)

Across all families, there was a commitment to maintaining the continuity of school provision, and seventeen families had retained their children's school places, even when the accommodation was a significant distance from their child's school. Parents described the importance of their children attending the same school despite the significant cost and time taken to travel each day.

'I didn't want to swap over schools because I wanted to try to keep things as normal as possible because he was after moving out of the house where he was after being brought up since he was a baby. So I didn't want to change schools as well as change home. And I know people say, 'Well, why can't you just change him to a school somewhere closer?' I don't want him to grow up that way I grew up, moving houses every month, moving schools every month. That's the lifestyle I had when I was a child. I was moved around constantly, and I don't want that for him, do you know what I mean? I want to keep it normal.' (Roisin)

Parents reported that school was important to their children, not only because of their friendships and learning experiences but also because of the stability and predictability it offered amid the uncertainty and stresses accompanying their experience of homelessness. Parents explained that educators responded to children's individual needs and the family's context by offering support, predictability, peer friendships, and time and space dedicated to playing and learning, which was otherwise difficult to have while experiencing high mobility and uncertainty in accommodation.

The need for friendship, trust and belonging

Parents recognised the importance of their children's friendships within the school and the challenges in supporting and maintaining these relationships while living in emergency accommodation. Parents highlighted the importance of positive teacher-child relationships as a source of support and comfort for children within the wider school community.

Fourteen parents reported that their children had a best friend or a small group of close friends and generally enjoyed warm relationships with their same-aged peers in school. In three cases, children attended the same school as their cousins, and parents valued these extended family networks in securing friendships and supporting the child. Despite the challenges presented by long travel times to their child's school, many parents described how the primary reason for maintaining the child's current school place was to maintain their existing friendships:

> *'I kind of thought about bringing them there (a crèche close to the temporary accommodation) but they had settled here, and they'd moved so much already. They started having friends, Clare loves it there, she has little friends, and she goes out playing and Peter, he doesn't call it crèche, he just calls it 'friends'.* (Jessica)

Nine parents explained the challenges for their children in maintaining friendships while living in emergency accommodation. Four parents described how children's peer relationships were impacted when their children could not take part in extracurricular activities or play with their school friends after school owing to the journey time and costs associated with participation. Five parents stated that their children's friendship groups had reduced to a small number of close or trusted friends during the period of homelessness. Parents believed their children sometimes found it difficult to maintain friendships when they did not live in the local community. Parents also explained that their children were unlikely to discuss their current accommodation with their school friends because of embarrassment about living in homeless accommodation.

> *'Her group of friends is much smaller now because she's very, very embarrassed. She's very shy and she wouldn't let anybody know. She wouldn't really tell any of her friends that we were homeless.'* (Margaret)

> *'They (child's teachers) have no problem with him, with his school work or anything like that, it is just in school he doesn't have a best friend; he keeps to himself. When his friends ask him "Where do you live?", he doesn't know what to say, like it's so, like he's embarrassed. Even if they say can I come to see you in your house, he can't bring them over, you know, even myself I can't bring my friends over.'* (Rachel)

Supportive relationships with teachers and school staff

Most parents spoke positively about their children's relationship with teachers and school staff and described how praise, encouragement and access to in-school support had assisted children during transition periods. In particular, parents of children attending preschool and primary school spoke of the warmth and affection that their children experienced in their relationships with teachers and school staff and how this promoted positive attitudes toward school and school work.

> *'She has such a special bond with every last teacher in here. Every last teacher knew our situation as well. She always had a bond with them no matter what but they really, really did look out for her when we became homeless and every last one of them are brilliant.'* (Karen)

Parents of secondary school children were also positive about their child's relationship with school staff. They gave examples of how some schools had offered children individual support or opportunities to speak with a guidance counsellor.

There's one certain teacher that she absolutely loves but, saying that, she loves most of the teachers. Now there was one or two of the teachers that was not understanding about her situation when she was going in late. I think it's very, very important to have teachers that understand situations and have that bond with children and not just turn their nose up to them and things like that. I don't like it when teachers do that. It's definitely important to have a good teacher there that you know you can just go and talk to. Definitely. (Margaret)

Parents of secondary school children stated that while their children had established good relationships with school staff and teachers, their child had asked their parents not to disclose their experience of homelessness to their school because of embarrassment or fear of being identified as 'different' to their peers.

'I told Jack that I'll ring the school and to tell them where we were at and he said, 'Don't ring them, don't let them know'. But I did ring them and I told them not to let him know that they know. He doesn't want to be different to anyone else there, he's thirteen you know?' (Caitriona)

Attitudes to school and educational aspirations

Parents were asked to describe their child's attitude to school, including their capabilities, self-confidence, motivation, and future academic aspirations. All parents stated that their children enjoyed attending and participating in school life. Parents with school-age children (16) indicated they had attended parent-teacher meetings with no significant learning or behavioural concerns identified by class teachers.

'We went for our parent-teacher meeting, our very first parent-teacher meeting. They said that she was getting on great, that her reading was excelling above everybody else, she was very good with her words but she always was because she's a chatterbox, she had no issues whatsoever.' (Veronica)

In discussing their children's academic learning and attainments in school, 12 parents indicated they were not concerned about their children's learning abilities and felt their children were progressing with their school work.

'I explained they were five months out of school, and they were going to put them back a year, but they didn't have to because Gemma was so bright. She was very clever, she had her school books in her bag and she was doing her school-work at home, and she was keeping in. When she went back into the new school after five months, they were testing her, and they said to me, like the teacher said to me, 'Oh my God, she's up there, this is great', I said, 'How could she be losing it when she was doing it at home? We made sure she did it at home.' (Cathleen)

While all parents reported that their children showed an interest in and enjoyed school, five parents spoke of how their children's attainments in class and school tests had deteriorated during the period of homelessness. Parents described how this resulted in disappointment for the children and sometimes additional stress within the family.

'Her grades were top of the range before we became homeless. Everything was As and Bs and everything….Now they're very good grades but just not as good as what they were beforehand. It's dropping down to Ds and Cs and things like that. Where she was getting As and Bs, not one A has she got this year. Now it's still good to me and she's still worked through it but she knows, she knows it in herself and she is disappointed and she's actually angry. She was like 'I just couldn't focus and I couldn't concentrate' and things like that.' (Karen)

Despite the negative impact of homelessness on children's educational experience, high parental aspirations for children's success in school were consistently evident throughout the interviews. Almost all parents (16) expected their children to successfully complete secondary-level education, with 15

parents anticipating their children to continue to third-level education. Parents considered achievement in education a way to fulfil ambitions and aspirations of future careers, financial stability, and enriched life experiences.

> *I'm trying to drum it into their heads now because they're young and hopefully it'll sink in while they're young, the way that we're homeless now, I keep highlighting that fact, you know what I mean? I keep asking them, 'Please, do your best in school. Go as far as you can with your education; do not drop out, go onto college. College will be the best days of your lives. When you come out of college, you'll be able to get jobs, you'll be able to build on getting your own deposits for mortgages so you are never in the position that we're in right now'. You know, so I'm trying to get that all into their little heads. I know it's an awful lot for a seven and eight-year-old to take in.* (Deirdre)

Discussion

The families that participated in the study varied significantly in terms of family composition, periods of homelessness, type and stability of accommodation, and the educational setting their children attended. For a substantial number of families, homelessness occurred alongside other forms of loss and adversity, including poverty, domestic violence, bereavement, and disability, that presented additional challenges in finding and sustaining accommodation. Despite this heterogeneity in family contexts, there was significant convergence across the five thematic areas: physiological needs, security, routine and predictability, friendship, trust and belonging, relationships with teachers and school staff and attitudes to school and educational aspirations. The most significant education-related need described by parents was the satisfaction of children's fundamental requirements for food, rest, and warmth due to scarce financial resources and a lack of appropriate facilities for food preparation, sleep, and hygiene in the accommodation. Parents believed that their children experienced exhaustion, hunger, and increased

susceptibility to illness because of poor living conditions and long journeys to and from school. These findings reflect themes emerging from other studies of family homelessness in an Irish context (Keogh et al., 2006; Share & Hennessy, 2017). Children who are tired, hungry, cold, experiencing stress, or in poor physical health are unlikely to fully engage in learning, as the satisfaction of basic physiological needs will precede their motivation to learn and participate within the educational setting. Supportive schools for children experiencing homelessness are those that can provide access to services that support children's learning, resilience, and survival needs (Begg et al., 2017; Chow et al., 2015; Clemens et al., 2018; Grothaus et al., 2011). In an Irish context, there is an increasing awareness and recognition of schools as an important contributor to children's health and wellbeing. This has included increased access to counselling and mental health support in schools and a policy focus on improving nutrition and combating food poverty through breakfast clubs and universal free school meals.

Children living in homeless accommodation are significantly more likely to require clinical evaluation for emotional and behavioural problems, meet thresholds for mental health referral, and experience higher rates of social isolation, depression, and suicidal ideation (Begg et al., 2017; Grothaus et al., 2011; Moore et al., 2018; Ziesemer et al., 1994; Zima et al., 1994). In this study, while the majority of children were said to be coping, parents believed that their children experienced feelings of sadness, shame, isolation, and embarrassment, particularly for parents of older children. Despite this, it was reported that the children in the study have positive attitudes towards schooling; they take pleasure in academic progress, enjoy positive peer relationships and value praise and encouragement from their teachers.

Existing research has found that children and families experiencing homelessness value schools not only as a source of routine and stability for children but also as

a means to avoid poverty and homelessness in the future (Begg et al., 2017; Clemens et al., 2018; Grothaus et al., 2011; Keogh et al., 2006). Gilligan (1998) asserts that positive school experiences can provide protective factors and contribute to the development of resilience by giving children routines and rituals that provide a safe base for them during periods of upheaval. Despite the significant challenges parents described in ensuring that their children had access to school and early childhood settings, they were committed to maintaining the same school placement. It was evident that parents tried their best to keep their children in the same school, as they believed it offered children routine, safety and security during significant disruption and uncertainty in their home lives.

Implications for practice

In Ireland, children are the largest and fastest-growing group experiencing homelessness. The available literature and findings of this study suggest that parents believe that the experience of homelessness has a significant negative impact on children's ability to access and participate in education. These findings align with international research and national reports indicating that 'school children who are homeless are seriously struggling in school while their teachers struggle to help them to cope' (Nunan, 2018, para.3 as cited in Maguire, 2018). Despite growing public concerns about child and family homelessness, there has been limited policy or practice consideration of the impact of homelessness on children's development, wellbeing and educational experiences.

All children living in Ireland have a constitutional and legal right to education. The government is responsible for delivering on this commitment, ensuring an adequate standard of living that upholds children's development and participation rights, particularly their right to educational access and participation. Given the rapidly increasing number of children experiencing homelessness across, it can be argued that schools require advice, support and assistance to identify and respond to the educational and development needs of these children. This includes greater awareness and understanding of the experience of family homelessness and access to information and practical support to meet children's basic needs, such as funding for school meals, transport, and clothing. Teachers and educational professionals must be assisted in developing trauma-sensitive approaches that support the learning, wellbeing and belonging of children experiencing adversity resulting from homelessness.

The Department of Education has identified the National Educational Psychology Service (NEPS) as a key agency that can support schools. As a national service, it can be suggested that educational psychologists working with NEPS are uniquely positioned to inform and lead a coordinated response to assist schools in identifying, responding to and monitoring the learning and social-emotional needs of a growing cohort of children experiencing homelessness. Through indirect casework and consultation with schools, educational psychologists can facilitate a shared understanding of the issues affecting children and families, working with teachers and other educational professionals to promote psychologically informed support systems that respond to children's needs for safety, security, routine, positive relationships, social experiences and meaningful learning experiences.

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