Schools as sites for Early Intervention and Prevention

Our fundamental point is that policies directed towards early intervention must focus primarily on schools (Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1998, p87).

A. Our Homeless Young People: Their Experiences, O’Connor, 1989

In 1989, O’Connor interviewed one hundred homeless young people in the Gold Coast, Logan City, King’s Cross and Canberra. O’Connor contended that

schools are potentially in a position to identify and respond to difficulties, to monitor the violation of the rights of the child and to ensure that their right to education is meaningfully met (p85).

He found from his research that schools were, instead, places of alienation which mirrored the marginalisation, rejection, and exclusion students experienced in their families. He reported that homeless students

found themselves on the outer at school [because of]: poor academic performance; lack of social skills; the disruptions of changing schools; simply not fitting in with their peers; falling foul of the authority structures; not complying with the school system’s expectations of normative behaviour (88).

The schools, far from responding to the needs of this group of students, rarely provided support or assistance to help them resolve their difficulties.

B. Our Homeless Children, Burdekin, 1989

In 1989, Burdekin and his fellow Commissioners, on the basis of O’Connor’s work and hearing directly from homeless young people, youth workers, teachers, school counsellors and some parents, concluded that:

our schools and teachers represent a critical resource which we must use effectively if we are to address the difficult issue of child and youth homelessness (278).

Furthermore, they stressed that

in the current social climate of continuing family disintegration, they [teachers] need, more than ever, programs, training, support and sufficient time to assist children who are homeless or in such domestic difficulty that they are at serious risk of becoming homeless. .... Therefore, although numerous onerous demands and expectations are already imposed on our teachers and schools, the issue of homelessness is one which must be addressed (278).

Consequently, the Burdekin Inquiry recommended that

• the school counsellor’s role be expanded to encompass these at risk students,
teachers, through professional development, develop a greater sensitivity and understanding of their needs, and
- schools implement early intervention and prevention programs.
The report finally recommended specially designed nationwide accommodation and support services be established for students detached from their families.

In 1985, the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Community Affairs, under the chairmanship of Mr. Allan Morris, MP, conducted an national inquiry into, among other things,
- the availability of family support and welfare services and
- their role and effectiveness in reducing homelessness and in resolving differences before young people leave home (xv).
This committee received a substantial amount of evidence which advocated for schools to be better resourced to respond to the needs of young people and families (243).

The Report strongly supported an adequately resourced pastoral care role in schools while, at the same time, noting that the extent of specialist support services available in schools across States and Territories is poor (258).
Finally, the committee recommended that schools
- become a focal point for early intervention and
- be given adequate resources to carry out this role effectively (274).

D. Homelessness among Young People in Australia, Crane & Brannock, 1996.
In 1996, Crane & Brannock interviewed out of home young people, their parents and service providers. They noted that young people wanted to be respected and listened to, and that parents were distressed, angry, defensive and embarrassed by their son or daughter leaving home, and had great difficulty gaining adequate responses from service providers at critical times.

Parents indicated that, in order to prevent homelessness among young people, most needed were whole of family counselling or family mediation, time out accommodation and changed school practices (viii).

Service providers indicated, there was a need for greater collaboration between community based service providers and schools (viii).

Crane and Brannock found that
- schools are an important site for both prevention and early intervention (103).
- Their interview data from both young people and parents indicated that schools were often the first to know that the young people were experiencing difficulties, though they may not have been aware that the difficulties could lead to homelessness.

Crane and Brannock concluded that schools are well placed locations for providing early intervention or prevention responses to youth homelessness ...
by networking more efficiently,
by breaking down the barriers between teachers, welfare workers, youth workers and others professionals (103).

E. Under-age school leaving, Brooks and Milne et al, 1997
In 1997, Brooks and Milne addressed early school leaving, that is, young people exiting secondary school before they reach the compulsory school leaving age. The study referred to this group as “under-age school leavers”.

The study recommended a number of policy responses, namely,
- mainstream school should be the focus of intervention
- the need to support school teachers through training and professional development
- the need for a range of non-mainstream school options
- the importance of community organisations as providers of alternative options and improved links between schools and community support services such as youth accommodation and health services (86).

In 1997, under the heading Children at Risk in the Education System, the Australian Law Reform Commission noted the connection between inadequate education, offending and homelessness. Consequently, the Commission, like the Burdekin Inquiry, recommended that

all teachers and school counsellors should receive professional development training in identifying children at risk of dropping out of school and referring them to appropriate government and non-government support services and programs (198).

G. Youth Homelessness: Early Intervention and Prevention, Chamberlain and MacKenzie, 1988
In 1998, Chamberlain and MacKenzie undertook research to answer two questions:
1. How does homelessness begin?
2. What is the process by which young people become homeless street children and homeless young people?
They claimed that a young person did not suddenly become homeless, but that they first were ‘at risk’ because of, for example, violence and/or addictions at home. Then the young people left home for short periods of time, which Chamberlain and MacKenzie called ‘short-term homelessness.’ As they returned to the streets for longer and longer periods of time, and the breaks from home became permanent, they became involved in the culture of the streets and were termed ‘long-term homeless.’ Finally, when the streets and its culture became their homes, they graduated to the ranks of the ‘chronic homeless’ (70-72).

Chamberlain & MacKenzie concluded
Most homeless students are at an early stage in the [homelessness] career process, and it is much easier to help them at this point. If young people remain at school and located in their local community, then they will not become deeply involved in the homeless sub-culture (87).

Chamberlain & MacKenzie summarised what they learnt about early intervention and prevention in ten points. Schools figured prominently in their findings.

1. Early intervention refers to measures to help young people as soon as possible after they become homeless. Preventative strategies include: individual support for young people who are perceptibly at risk; school strategies directed towards all young people; and strategies focusing on groups with higher risk levels.

2. Schools must embrace a broad responsibility for the education and welfare of young people in the 21st century and become full-service schools. Student support and welfare have to become a secure part of the curriculum and schools must work closely with community agencies.

3. Early intervention should be proactive as well as reactive, not just waiting until young people in need ask for help.

4. A comprehensive approach for homeless youth and teenagers at risk will include both early intervention and prevention strategies. Early intervention is the starting point and the basis for extending to preventative initiatives. Prevention on its own is usually ineffectual.

5. Early intervention policy and practice to assist homeless young people should focus on secondary schools, not primary schools.

6. Early intervention involves schools and community agencies working together.

7. Schools in the same community have to work together to support homeless teenagers and young people at risk. This will only come about if there is a government directive that all schools must have an adequate welfare infrastructure, and there is funding for coordination initiatives in local communities.

8. An early intervention strategy requires coordination at all levels of the service system - at the client level, at the local community level, and at the government level.

9. A school based early intervention policy is cost effective. However, to realise the benefits, a long-term strategy must be pursued.

10. The welfare resources required in school for effective early intervention to assist homeless youth are largely the same resources needed to respond to issues such as drug abuse, youth suicide and early school leaving (115-129).


In 2002, Chamberlain & MacKenzie presented the main findings from the second national census of homeless school students, carried out in August 2001. The report estimates the total number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18, on the basis of information from the school census combined with Supported Assistance Accommodation Program (SAAP) data.

1. Numbers of homeless secondary students in Queensland: 3,073, i.e., 15 per 1,000 of school population, with the national average being 10 per 1,000 of school population.

2. Estimated number of homeless young people aged 12 to 18 in Queensland: 6,381, i.e., 18 per 1,000, with the national rate of homelessness being 14 per 1,000 of the youth population.
3. Percentage of homeless young people in education (school and TAFE), unemployed or in full-time work, in Queensland: 39% in education; 60% unemployed, 1% in full-time work. Proportion of homeless students in state and Catholic schools in Queensland: State 94%; Catholic 6% (20).

4. There were 21,000 homeless young people in 1994, compared with 26,000 in 2001. This is an increase of 24% (31).

Chamberlain and MacKenzie found that most teenagers have their first experience of homelessness while they are still at school. Other studies support this finding.
- In a study of 100 homeless young people prepared for the Burdekin Report (1989), Ian O’Connor found that 82% were 15 or younger when they had their first experience of homelessness.
- Similarly, Crane and Brannock (1996) found that 92% of their respondents were 15 or younger when they first left home.
- The first national census of homeless school students (in May 1994) reported that there were 11,000 homeless secondary students in census week, and estimated that 25,000 to 30,000 students experience a period of homelessness each year (MacKenzie and Chamberlain 1995).

Chamberlain and MacKenzie concluded that:
1. Our core argument is that schools are sites for early intervention where it is possible to provide young people with assistance at the earliest stages of the ‘homeless career’ (33).
2. Schools have a critical role to play because they can support young people who want to remain at school and make the transition to independent living (33).
3. It seems reasonable to suggest that homeless teenagers and at risk students are more likely to stay at school if there is a strong welfare infrastructure (38).
4. When homeless teenagers drop out of the education system they do not all become long-term unemployed, but this is the destination of the largest group (38).

J. Couch Surfing in the Burbs: young, hidden & homeless, Rachael Uhr, 2003

In 2003, Rachael Uhr, surveying out of home young people from some of the north-eastern suburbs of Brisbane, found that young people wanted to maintain links with what was familiar: home, school and local community. However, these out of home young people did not consider themselves homeless. Being ‘homeless’ for them meant living in the gutter, as a hopeless alcoholic, for instance.

In a section on schools, Uhr noted that

the role of school and the relationships formed through school provided a large component of the community connectedness articulated by young people (34).

School provided the place where friendships were formed and maintained, gave structure to the day, gave young people something else to think about other than their situation.
and, in many cases, gave them access to supportive staff. Many young people said that school was a priority for them, but difficult to maintain once they had left home.

Uhr concluded that schools are an important institution in young people’s lives, especially when they are at risk of ending up out of home because of circumstances beyond their control:

*If staff in the school system are skilled in identifying ‘at risk’ students and have the ability to source appropriate responses, it seems that they are more likely to better assist young people in meeting their school and personal needs* (72).

**Bibliography and Other Resources**


