Schools as Sites of Homelessness Prevention: Learning from Youth Experiences in a Canadian Context

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Abstract   Youth homelessness in Canada impacts a significant number of young people. More specific to our focus, populations of young people who are more likely to experience homelessness (e.g. youth with mental health issues, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, youth from care, and Indigenous youth) face significant barriers to accessing safe, culturally appropriate, and supportive education, suggesting rights to housing and rights to education are intersecting equity issues. This article presents findings from a participatory research project led by members of Youth Action Research Revolution, carried out in Tio'tiá:ke/Montréal, Québec, Canada. Building from experiences young people shared, this article highlights aspects of the public education system that pose problems for youth who are precariously housed or homeless, namely, the application of one-size-fits-all approaches, barriers for students with mental health or learning disability diagnoses, and the lack of clear or actionable institutional mechanisms for students to access preventative support. Following this, we outline educational discourses, practices, and processes that constitute where something may have been done differently to prevent homelessness. We conclude with possible actions to support youth homelessness prevention in schools, including creating more flexible ways for children and families to access supports, resourcing "champion" teachers, and addressing the insidious biases and discrimination in the organization of school policies.

KeyWords   youth homelessness, participatory, mental health, schools, homelessness prevention

Youth homelessness in Canada impacts a significant number of young people, with at least 35,000 youth experiencing homelessness in a year (Gaetz et al., 2016). Youth facing housing precarity in Canada are more likely to be young people of color, Indigenous youth, 2SLGBTQIA+ youth, youth with mental health issues, and youth with disabilities, rather than White, middle-class, cisgender, able-bodied youth (Gaetz et al., 2016). These disproportionately impacted groups often face existing barriers to accessing safe, culturally appropriate, and supportive schooling (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014), suggesting rights to housing and rights to education are intersecting equity issues. Youth who experience homelessness face barriers to attending school, may have issues concentrating on class material, may be navigating untreated mental and physical health issues, and may need to prioritize day-to-day survival over academic activities (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015). As a result, young people experiencing homelessness

are less likely to graduate or attend post-secondary school than stably housed youth (Gupton, 2017). These interruptions have implications for labour market access, as those without secondary diplomas are less likely to secure stable employment, leading to ongoing cycles of precarity that often persevere into adulthood (Baker Collins, 2013).

While school policies may rarely speak explicitly to connections between housing and education for youth (Smith, 2019) research suggests that this is a key connection to explore (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015). Stable housing has direct links to success in school and has been identified as the "most significant predictor of high school completion" (Soloman, 2013, p. 84). Liljedahl et al. (2013) found that increased housing stability was directly linked to greater success in school. The longer a youth is living in poverty, particularly without stable housing, the more exacerbated negative effects become, with the "probability of dropping out" and "school failure" increas[ing] the longer children are "exposed to relational adversity" (Jensen, 2013, p. 29). While precarity increases educational disengagement for youth, stability in housing can increase attendance and engagement. Indeed, programs like Housing First for Youth, which address the unique pathways that may lead youth to experience homelessness (Gaetz et al., 2016), draw on research that demonstrates youth who have stable housing are more likely to attend school (Liljedahl et al., 2013). In one study, 45% of chronically homeless adults who formerly experienced youth homelessness saw insufficient education as contributing directly to their current homelessness (Baker Collins, 2013), suggesting this issue is likely to follow individuals into adulthood and compound as they age. Additionally, schools can provide important social connections and supports which can be particularly impactful for young people at risk of homelessness (Moore, 2013). Research also suggests that ensuring early access to educational supports, such as mental health and learning disability diagnoses, can significantly bolster efforts to prevent youth homelessness before it occurs (Thielking, La Sala, & Flatau, 2017). This article explores how schools are currently treating youth who are navigating housing precarity, while considering how youth homelessness prevention efforts can harness the resistance and work (Smith, 2004) that homeless young people already employ.

Objectives
This article presents findings from a participatory research project led by members of Youth Action Research Revolution (YARR). YARR is made up of Malenfant, Nichols, and four youth co-researchers who worked together from 2018-2021. Five of our six members have lived experience of youth homelessness and educational disengagement. Our team members hold a diversity of racial, linguistic, gender, sexuality, and class identities that have shaped our experiences and contributed to our team's collective understanding of youth homelessness, education, prevention, and action (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). This research took place in Tio'tia:ke/Montréal (Kanien'kehá:ka territory), Québec, Canada. While this work explored multiple social systems, this article will focus on the trajectories youth shared with us about the education system.

Building from experiences young people shared, this article highlights several aspects of the public education system that pose problems for youth who are precariously housed or homeless. These include:

1. Normative standards embedded in the policies and everyday operations of public schooling that systematically exclude and disadvantage young people living in poverty and/or experiencing homelessness
2. Inadequate and inaccessible psycho-educational diagnostic services and corresponding support
3. Opaque and/or inconsistently applied school policies and rules intersecting with systematic disregard for young people's self-defined struggles and challenges

We will first outline the methodologies and theories that informed our work together. Following this, we outline key themes across young people's experiences where something may have been done differently to prevent their homelessness, followed by possible actions to support youth homelessness prevention in schools.

Theoretical and Methodological Groundings

Our approach to research is grounded feminist-Marxist methodology Institutional Ethnography (Smith, 2004) (IE) and Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)   (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016). More than methodology, each approach is conceptualized as an ethical and epistemological stance to understanding social structures, rooted in the everyday experiences of people, and focused on social change. These theoretical touchstones emphasize relational work to trace out how everyday experiences can illuminate the broader social organization of issues such as homelessness. IE is inspired by Marx's approach to political economic analysis (Smith, 2004), and was developed to improve the transparency and navigability of ruling institutional processes and discourses. Rather than turning people into the objects of sociological discourse, Smith argued that a sociologist's training would be better put to use in the service of individuals and groups seeking to organize and advocate for institutional changes (e.g., to shift educational policies); to get something accomplished (e.g., secure access to stable housing); or otherwise actualize a collective or individual objective (e.g., organize community educational supports). IE thus has the pragmatic material and epistemic aim to explain how particular aspects of social structures "enter into, organize and disorganize" our lives.

IE's grounding in the material realities of people can be furthered by mobilizing YPAR's dedication to meaningful knowledge generated by, and used for, youth, as a "radical epistemological challenge to the traditions of social science, most critically on the topic of where knowledge resides" (Fine, 2008, p. 215). YPAR recognizes that all youth are "experts in their own lives," (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016, p. 4) and research supports them to mobilize their collective expertise toward actions. As such, we structured our research to begin from the diverse experiences of our team and participants, and analysis emerged from those daily experiences. Following IE and YPAR, our work was always aimed at the organization of actions, rather than the application of a set theory to what youth were telling us. We mobilized YPAR and IE in tandem, finding that each is useful in bolstering the other and in ensuring that "those most impacted by a problem…co-research it and take action" (Bertrand, Durand & Gonzalez, 2017). Further, our training of youth co-researchers was grounded in these

epistemological orientations, allowing them to draw on their expertise as youth, rather than "training young people to mimic the behaviors of adult researchers" (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016, p. 2). The analysis presented here is one avenue through which YARR aims to make sense and mobilize research toward justice.

Study Design:
The research questions guiding this work were:

1. What have been/are young people's experiences with educational institutions, and how have these experiences shaped/been shaped by conditions of housing instability?
2. What institutional and social junctures (service interactions, policies, programs, interventions, processes) do young people identify in their histories?
3. What are the policy and legislative contexts which shape the practices, discourses, and programs young people describe in their trajectories through schooling and housing precarity?

YARR addressed the first two questions through interviews with currently or formerly homeless young people. The third question was explored as part of a legal internship process, whereby two law students worked with our research team in 2018, as well as a policy scan undertaken by Malenfant. All research training and team-building opportunities included payment for youth co-researchers. Funding was provided initially by Nichols' research grants, and after a new research design, was produced with co-researchers' federal research funding. Malenfant's doctoral scholarships also provided ongoing funds for data collection, training, and knowledge mobilization. The latter included a variety of activities to support youth co-researcher involvement in sharing approaches and findings.

Methods
In line with a YPAR and IE approach, four youth researchers were hired, through a community organization. They were trained to undertake ethnographic interviews with other young people with lived and living experience of homelessness. Youth researchers were provided a stable and ongoing pay throughout the project, one which was flexible and accommodated the trajectories and needs they were navigating in their own lives. We worked with a dedication to collective decision making and transparency, and engaged throughout the process in reciprocal learning (for example, inviting law students to learn from youth researchers' everyday knowledge while teaching us about legal structures in Quebec). While we necessarily navigated hierarchies of power and access, as a team housed in a post-secondary research institution, we drafted documents together in each phase of the project, pivoted when we needed, and took time to support one another's needs through articulating with honesty and considering mutual aid approaches. We undertook every meeting bilingually, and we decided together where and how we met. We

drafted protocols for our work together, as well as how we would navigate our responsibilities and conflict as team members. We worked with the community organization to ensure that necessary supports, including access to food, transit, and mental health care, were available.

Youth researchers, as well as youth participants, shared experiences with the education system[1] before, during, and after experiences of homelessness. The team conducted a total of 64 interviews with 38 youth aged 16–29. Given the significant institutional involvement of many homeless youth (Nichols, 2019), we decided, as a team, to provide more time for young people to share, conducting up to three (3) interviews with each youth. Each participant was interviewed by one youth researcher and one academic researcher. In terms of the demographics of the young people interviewed, the youth researchers thought it was important to allow participants to identify in whatever ways were important to them. As a result, it is difficult to include demographic information across participants, as there was a large variety in what identifiers youth shared. Still, while we spoke with some Indigenous youth and youth with disabilities, the team had intended to undertake more recruitment with these communities of young people—we identified that these communities are over-represented in populations of youth experiencing homelessness, but perhaps due to recruitment at a settler organization that was not physically accessible, we aimed to do targeted recruitment elsewhere in Tio'tiá:ke/ Montreal. This was prevented due to the Covid-19 outbreak. While some team members and participants did share their own experiences of navigating schools through a lens of their own Indigeneity or disability, we hope this will be a topic we continue to explore. For the purposes of this article, we include race, sexuality, and gender demographics, as these were the identities most consistently shared across participants.

Recruitment of interview participants took place primarily by youth researchers at the day center of our partner organization and within youth researchers' peer groups. As young people were speaking about their experiences in schools throughout their lives, some youth shared about schools outside of Québec or Montreal, speaking to experiences across ministries of education and institutions of learning. Participants were compensated $20 for each interview they did with our team, participating in a formal written informed consent process for each interview. Participants were compensated with cash (rather than through a grocery card, for example) because we are committed to honoring young people's bodily and intellectual autonomy. The research design was approved by McGill University's Research Ethics Board, where Malenfant was a doctoral student and Nichols was a professor at the time of this research. Following data collection, interviews were transcribed in French or English.

Following data collection, YARR collectively (academic and youth researchers) created a code-book to guide coding of interviews in NVivo. This process was also shaped by the Covid-19 pandemic, though we initially met to work collectively on university computers to develop coding and analysis strategies. In the next section, we reflect on this analysis to present a synthesis of themes emerging from youth interviews, as well as possible points where the education system might act to prevent and intervene in young people's experiences of homelessness.

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1 While the data collected on the education system is presented here, we also explored child welfare, criminal legal, health and mental healthcare and housing systems.

Situating YARR in Educational Policy and Practice: School Contexts

The scope of this project situated the experiences of youth in the policy and practice contexts in schools, particularly with a focus on the Quebec[2] Ministry of Education's Education Act, and the practices, policies, and laws that organize schooling for youth in Montréal. In Quebec, schools are part of the "educational childcare system." While other provinces and territories have almost no policies around educational responsibilities to youth homelessness (at a provincial level nor school board/school levels), Québec's Ministry of Education has signed onto multiple versions of Québec's Interministerial Action Plans on Homelessness Prevention (in 2003, 2014, 2017). Still, specific school boards (or school service centres), have responsibilities to draft plans with ministerial partners, such as policy, child welfare or social service ministries, and to develop protocols on prevention.

A key policy that was referenced by young people (discussed in more detail below), was the duty to report, which meant that potential signs that a young person was experiencing homelessness or precarity may be cause to report to the Department of Youth Protection (DPJ). In the absence of policies or practices on homelessness, the only line of action for educators is often to connect students to the DPJ. This is a concerning response, in particular due to the simultaneous over-reporting of poor and Indigenous families (Blackstock, Bamblett & Black, 2020) and under-reporting of middle class and affluent families (Howze & McKeig, 2019). This is particularly relevant given the high overlap between youth protection system involvement and experiences of homelessness (Nichols, 2019) as well as the barriers to early intervention and prevention a fear of the youth protection system can present.

Despite the absence of educational policies to address the prevention of youth homelessness over half of the youth we spoke with highlighted the positive impact that a "champion" teacher, staff, or professional could have in their trajectories, suggesting that with sufficient training, funding and resources, educational staff could be incredibly impactful in preventing youth homelessness. This suggests that practice shifts can make a difference for youth in schools. Unfortunately, with increased neoliberal restructuring and cuts (Evans & Goguen, 2019), teachers currently lack capacity and time, something youth participants shared as a current limitation for realizing schools as sites of homelessness prevention.

Findings

Themes across the experiences of young people demonstrate patterns of institutional exclusion young people experience in schools. Namely, schools create, and practice interventions designed for a particular ideal student which reflect normative notions of race (White), class (middle), sexuality (heterosexual), ability (able-bodied and neurotypical), and gendered (cisgender) norms, applied universally to all students. Three themes are outlined in the following section: the application of one-size-fits-all approaches; barriers for students with mental health or learning disability diagnoses; and the lack of clear or actionable institutional mechanisms for students to access preventative support.

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2 Within Québec, as elsewhere, there are different governance structures amongst Indigenous schoolboards. For the purpose of this article, the policy and practice focus is on Anglophone and Francophone school service centres.

One Size Does Not Fit All: Normative Constructions of Students in Schools

A major point of failure that emerged in YARR meetings and interviews was the failure of One-Size-Fits-All (Wun, 2016) schooling, or approaches to instruction, evaluation, and intervention in schools that assumed a particular type of student. Echoing other studies (Murray et al., 2004), youth who fit outside of normative expectations shared that schools enforced standards of normative behavior through punishment, including expelling students. Both Lucas—a White, straight, man—and Rowan—a White, bisexual, cis-woman from a suburb—described these punishments as fitting into school policies that excluded those who did not "fit the mold." Particularly, youth who were racialized, 2SLGBTQIA+, poor, or did not speak the language of instruction, felt they did not fit normative expectations enforced by schools and, therefore, faced punishment, stigma, and bullying from students and teachers. Youth described teachers and school staff refusing to act on requested concessions, accommodations, or support while experiencing homelessness and housing precarity. Youth also shared that behaviors that may be symptoms of their homelessness—failing to show up to school on time, failure to pay attention in class, or slipping grades—were frequently treated by teachers and school staff as requiring punishment rather than supportive intervention.

Many young people described facing discrimination while trying to learn, suggesting they were not meeting the expectations of teachers. Vee, a South-Asian man who later benefited from access to specialized educational supports, described middle school teachers not only failing to support him, but to actively tell him and his parents would fail:

> Vee: I got a lot of insults, in the beginning…some teachers said, "You can't learn French, you can't learn English, you will never be able to learn, you'll never learn.
>
> I: Wasn't it their job, to make sure that you could learn?
>
> Vee: Yeah, but they don't want to, they're actually…I don't know if you call this racism, or you call this discrimination. I had teachers, even if I didn't understand French or English perfectly, my parents used to call me to say, "This teacher is discrediting you, because of your colour."

In addition to over experiences of discrimination, youth shared that schools regularly failed to understand their unique situations. This often meant that teachers could not (or would not) make exceptions or accommodate students' unique circumstances. For example, Fariha, a queer woman of color, shared about navigating a newly diagnosed learning disability, family abuse and conflict, experiences of homophobia, mental health challenges, and periodic episodes of sleeping outside while attending secondary school. Her teacher refused to provide concessions or extra resources. This was the first of multiple occasions where Fariha described teachers explaining that they could not make exceptions for or accommodate her circumstances. She recalls her teacher saying: "If I make an exception for you, I have to make an exception for

everybody." As Fariha pointed out to us, her teacher's actions ignored the fact that other students were living with their parents, while she was navigating conflict and homelessness. Schools anticipate students are housed in a safe and supportive family home—something Fariha failed to experience during her educational trajectory.

Fariha then attempted to access mental health services through her school, an intervention that would have allowed her to remain educationally engaged and access accommodations. However, her parents refused to sign the forms she needed to submit to initiate the process. While teachers and school staff recognized that Fariha needed access to services, they are not able or willing to shift the bureaucratic process for accessing the school psychologist—a process that assumed parents' active participation. This led directly to multiple instances of running away from home, involvement with police and social workers, and periods of sleeping rough or in shelters. As she attempted to access academic and mental health accommodations that may have prevented her homelessness, she came up against a normative conceptualization of students (not homeless) and access to accommodations (with parental approval). Through refusing to provide diverse ways for her to engage, the school not only failed to prevent Fariha from becoming homeless, but contributed to her housing precarity. Additionally, even when youth described going through the "right" steps to access individualized supports in schools, such as Fariha's attempts to apply for financial and housing supports, their unique experiences (of homelessness) regularly fell outside of what was deemed acceptable for accommodations.

Not Being Believed

A majority of young people described not being trusted, believed, or consulted, particularly if their situations fell outside of interventions for which teachers and school staff has been trained. Many shared experiences of not being believed, either when they asked for help or when they talked about being harmed by others, resulting in a lack of intervention following disclosures. Not being believed from an early age diminishes the chances of young people reaching out to teachers or school staff when they do need support. It also leads to a lower likelihood of building relationships of trust with professionals (Hope et al., 2019; Moore, 2013). Youth shared that they were less likely to be believed if they were deemed to be behaving "badly," or if they did not fit within the normative ideals underlying school policy and practice about what it meant to be a "good" student.

Related to experiences of not being believed were fears of harmful interventions associated with youth protection and/or policing. For example, Robert—a White, straight man who spent much of his education in the DPJ—faced criminalization when police responded to a mental health crisis at his high school, leaving him to finish his education in a detention center. As educators are legally bound by a duty to report concerns about youth maltreatment, young people shared that they often hid signs that they may be experiencing homelessness or housing precarity. Knowing that educators may contact child welfare services or law enforcement, they feared being removed from their homes and/or criminalization from police. Youth were seldom asked what intervention they thought would be most appropriate for their situation. Institutional responses that relied solely on youth protection or policing

interventions undermined youth agency and failed to imagine the harmful effects of these responses. Unfortunately, the imposition of punitive interventions taught youth not to reach out in the future.

Enforcing Normative Behavior: Youth Experiences of Disproportionate Punishment

Youth also described harsh punishment in schools, the intentions of which they interpreted as reinforcing ideal student behavior (Annamma et al., 2019). Just as one must "fit the mold"—as both Lucas and Rowan put it—in order to receive or benefit from positive interventions, alternatively being labelled a "bad seed"—as Matti, a White/Haudenosaunee Two-Spirit youth shared—leads to increased surveillance from school staff and harsher disciplinary sanctions. Those who face exclusionary discipline (e.g., suspensions, relocations, and expulsions) are doubly disadvantaged in that they are prevented from receiving support and ac—vely pushed out of schools (Nichols, 2019). Many youths also described being punished for small or inconsequential incidents. For example, Palle—a White, straight man—described regular conflicts with teachers who didn't "speak to [him] like a human." Eventually, these everyday conflicts resulted in exclusionary punishments like suspensions and expulsions. Palle's experiences echo those of several other young people, who described unclear or unfair punishments as disrupting their education or pushing them out. Palle also interpreted these educational exclusions as resulting from school staff's belief that he was "bad." He explained that he was expelled for doing things other youth did with impunity, like asking to go to the bathroom or handing in assignments late. Some youth echoed recommendations developed with our youth researchers, who called for the consideration of white supremacy and settler colonialism in any moves to address youth homelessness in schools, sharing that Black youth received disproportionate suspensions and punishment for the same "problems" in schools. Lucas, for example, shared that Black classmates would receive maximum suspensions for minor infractions, echoing the literature on the experiences of Black students in across Canada (Maynard, 2017) and linking experiences of homelessness to broader systems of discrimination.

Learning Disabilities and Mental Health Diagnoses

Youth shared that access to official diagnoses for accommodations in schools was often difficult to obtain, and their parents were often expected to commit time and labor to navigate institutional processes for mental health and learning disability diagnoses. A number of youths shared that their parents did not have the ability, time, resources, knowledge, or access to diagnostic processes or accommodations. Unfortunately, apart from one participant who navigated psycho-educational processes in school—Matthieu, a White, straight, neurodiverse man—youth experiences were marked by a lack of psycho-educational assessment and support capacity, misdiagnoses and mis-medication, and lack of access to the supports they needed or wanted. These challenges contributed to participants' institutional distrust and growing skepticism that any institutionalized intervention could meet their needs. Multiple youth connected their struggles in school to being diagnosed, misdiagnosed, or unable to receive a diagnosis for a learning, mental health, and/or neuro-biological disability. For instance, despite

repeated disciplinary interventions throughout elementary and secondary school, Palle explained that he was never identified as a student who may have a learning or behavioral challenge:

> I: Yeah, did you ever—did anyone, I don't know if this has already been covered, but any time between 0 and grade 6, did you have any testing or diagnoses for learning difficulties, or anything like that? No?
>
> P: No, my parents didn't bring me to those kinds of things. So, I was like, "Eh."

Jaide--a Métis, genderfluid youth--explained they were never prioritized for publicly funded assessments through the school itself, leaving their parents to seek out and pay for a private neuro-psychological assessment in the private sector. But the costs for the full neuro-psychological assessment (typically around $3,000 CAD) were prohibitive for Jaide's family, and the assessment was not completed, meaning Jaide did not receive a timely Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that addressed their specific learning challenges. Instead, Jaide was moved into different schools and different programs, none of which addressed their specific learning needs, and many of which exposed Jaide to bullying. After receiving several unofficial diagnoses from teachers who are not trained to do diagnostic work, Jaide was eventually diagnosed in the private system with dyslexia--a diagnosis that allowed Jaide to understand themselves and their educational needs. But by this point, they were well on their way to disengaging from school.

While some youths were unable to access a diagnosis that could have had the potential to lead to more specialized support, others found the diagnoses they received did not lead to easier access and accommodations. Youth like Matti described being heavily or mis-medicated (for both learning disabilities and mental health diagnoses, which often overlapped), resulting in instabilities of mood, body, and cognition that disrupted education. Finding the "right" diagnosis or medication—one which fits their understanding of their experiences and helps them actualize their goals (educational or otherwise)—required multiple attempts and/or incorrect diagnoses, sometimes heavily aggravating mental health issues. In many instances, doctors and professionals simply tell youth to just "give it time," as Rowan was told, and to continue taking medication, even in the face of suicidal ideation and significant educational disengagement. Schools were not always aware of these shifts to a young person's medications or treatment regimes, and young people described receiving educational punishments and exclusions rather than accommodations and support.

Institutional Action as Superficial, Limited, or Damaging: Inadequate Responses
Many youths perceived attempts from schools to connect them to accommodations or supports as superficial. Jolene—a White, straight woman—described this as staff "not really trying," ironically echoing narratives that youth heard from teachers about their own behaviors: they didn't care, weren't trying, were lazy, or were wasting time. Youth we spoke with described a range of interventions that they did not understand, including some experiences of mandatory programs like anger-management or psychologist or counsellor appointments, which often

required that they miss class. While these interventions were sometimes seen as helpful, the benefits were seldom immediately recognized by youth, who, instead, felt coerced to participate. In many cases, it was only years later that youth identified these earlier interventions as potentially protective.

Youth were seldom provided with an accessible explanation for their mandatory participation in these interventions. As such, many youths assumed the programs were for "problem" students, or students who were facing family breakdown, even though this was never explicitly stated by educational staff. Furthermore, at the cessation of appointments, youth were expected to return to class and keep up as normal without follow-up or sustained delivery of support. While many youths who were able to access mental health or scholastic support found it helpful, there were often a limited number of meetings (as few as 3-5 in some cases) and no follow-ups, practices which stand in contrast to trauma-informed approaches to mental health. Jolene, Rowan, Matti, and others who attempted to access school-based mental health supports described receiving no referrals to ongoing or other services when these sessions ran out. Further, if they missed sessions, they lost the right to continue accessing support.

Youth also shared that counsellors or staff were ill-equipped to deal with the unique situations that homeless youth experience. For example, staff failed to help young people navigate the gap between child and adult services, nor did they ensure youth had access to basic material supports that all students need to participate in school (e.g., healthy food, a safe and secure place to sleep). In examples that youth shared, staff are not sufficiently trained, resourced or equipped to support youth experiencing complex issues like homelessness. Of those who were able to access supports, young people recognized that school-based mental health services were underfunded, underdeveloped, and ill-equipped to deal with the realities youth were facing throughout their lives and during experiences of homelessness. For example, Sandra—a trans/non-binary, queer person—shared that supports at their suburban secondary school, including for when they began using drugs, were little more than "encouragement." While youth recognized people were often well-intentioned, most described not trusting that educators and school mental health workers understood the root of their problems. In the absence of trust, young people were likely to stop seeing mental health workers or participating in programs. Youth expressed that professionals seldom understood their realities and failed to adapt their approaches to be suitable for young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness. For example, multiple youth shared that teachers and school staff demonstrated a misunderstanding of homelessness, positioning it as an individual failure, including Fatima sharing that a school counsellor sharing that she was "too smart to be on the street" and should "suck it up." Sandra also outlined how educators in a middle-class suburban schools seemed to ignore signs that she was facing precarity, reinforcing a sentiment that homelessness "doesn't happen here." Further, many youths did not want to divulge additional details of their lives for fear of punishment, stigma, or involvement of police or youth protection.

Discussion and Conclusion:

While there are emerging developments around the role of schools in addressing homelessness in Canadian and international contexts (Sohn & McKitterick, 2019), there is a dearth of official school policy to address student homelessness. The interventions that youth described over the course of their academic trajectory are thus not official "homelessness" interventions but rather responses to a variety of issues that youth faced before, during, and after periods of homelessness. These policies, which may include child welfare, wellness, or equity policies, further reinforce the normative organization of schooling—in part, because they do not understand homelessness as an issue that students would be navigating in the first place. Youth experiences suggest a lack of official responses to homelessness in schools; this results in obfuscated and unclear institutional processes when a student is in need. In the absence of an institutional understanding of homelessness, and particularly the structural and systemic factors that contribute to it, youth are the ones who hold the blame for their own educational disengagement and precarity. This blame becomes internalized by youth in long-lasting ways. Many young people attributed their educational disengagement to their own "stupidity," laziness, and lack of understanding or caring. It is also clear that in the absence of official policies or training on homelessness, young people do not believe that school staff understand what they need in terms of supports, or trust that schools could do anything to prevent or intervene on issues of housing. However, this also demonstrates an important point of possible action; the creation of educational policy and teacher training on youth homelessness may hold significant promise for supporting homelessness prevention (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015).

Several young people shared how they felt, even when they reached out for support, that teachers and staff were distrusting of them. Not believing students upholds a broader devaluation of youth knowledge and experience as not true, not valuable, devoid of reality and how things "really are," particularly because they are seen as too young to understand how the world works or be agentic in decisions about their own homelessness prevention (Conseil Jeunesse de Montréal, 2017). This stance is linked to the long-standing paternalistic role of schools (Battiste & Henderson, 2018) and to narratives that young people don't really understand how systems work (Akom, Ginwright & Cammarota, 2008; Gillen, 2014). However, there is a significant difference between not knowing how things "really are" and facing institutional barriers and systemic processes that are intentionally inaccessible to youth (i.e. because they aren't old enough, aren't well/unwell enough, aren't White, don't have access to finances, or don't have an advocate). Furthermore, while information about rights and institutional processes may lead to more equitable access, this is not a guarantee. One theme emerging from YARR's research is a disconnect between laws and policies as they are imagined and how they are experienced, suggesting that knowing your rights (including how a school may be violating the Education Act by unfairly pushing you out) does not guarantee you can prevent it from happening.

Research on progressive discipline policies in schools (Nichols, 2019) suggests it is likely that the accumulation of everyday conflicts underpinning why youth are being pushed out of school remain unclear to students themselves. For example, the administration's decision

to expel Palle may have been conceptualized by school staff as a culmination of multiple responses to problematic behavior; nevertheless, none of these institutional processes were made evident to Palle. If educational policies and procedures are not fully explained to young people--or not explained in ways that make sense to them – they will come up with other ways of understanding their exclusion from/in these spaces. Rather than being treated as unfit or unable to understand institutional processes, youth must be actively involved in proposed solutions to act on issues of youth homelessness and education. This includes encouraging youth agency and building structures where they are culturally and socially supported in their trajectories (Conseil Jeunesse de Montréal, 2017). Examining what enables young people to participate in school (and what does not) is key to designing supports and programs that target and address their needs, strengths, and aspirations:

> Understanding the factors that contribute to academic resilience is important. If we are aware of the specific factors that promote participation in school for some homeless youth, we may be able to design programs and policies that provide these supports for all homeless youth. (Liljedahl et al., 2013, p. 277)

Building from young people's experiential knowledge, our research has examined problematic and promising educational practices, programs, and policies for young people who are precariously housed. Efforts to understand the factors that undermine educational participation for youth experiencing homelessness can contribute to the development of universal educational interventions for all students.

The danger of school policy and practice not imagining homelessness as an issue they must reckon with—even if its manifestations are right in front of teachers and staff—is suggestive of the normative standards for educational participation and the types of experiences that are recognized as valid in schools. As youth shared, when they did disclose that they were at risk of, or were experiencing, homelessness, they were frequently told (sometimes at a very early point in the trajectory) that they were "liars." This points to a more insidious issue we must deal with; that policies and structures in place to (theoretically) support youth will fail to make a difference if youth are not believed when they attempt to access them. To recognize the potential of homelessness interventions and prevention, youth leadership and agency must be fostered.

A key point of action also lies in expanding on flexible points of connection to supports and accommodation for young people and their families. Youth often found success through connecting with a champion or individual who made a difference, often seen as a teacher or school staff who "gets it." Finding diverse and low-barrier supports for youth can be significant in successfully supporting homeless students; teachers are more effective in ensuring stability and preventing homelessness when they build relationships and understand the individual needs of students (Moore, 2013). Griffin et al. (2019) argue that "teacher support may be even more influential for homeless youth because homelessness is often characterized by inconsistent caregiver support and fragmented family relationships" (p. 113). This is a powerful potential action in that it is grounded in supporting youth through believing and listening to them,

rather than implementing normative, disciplinary, and paternalistic responses to signs that they may be at risk of, or experiencing, homelessness. The idea of having a "champion" is echoed in the work of advocates and research on implementing caring and effective approaches to youth homelessness in schools (Hallett, Skrla, & Low, 2015). The support these teachers and staff offered was often outside of their official roles, or even breaking procedures and laws to support young people, to ensure students were able to survive and meet their basic needs. The creation of robust policies that not only prepare teachers to respond to the signs that a young person might be homeless (Mackenzie & Thielking, 2014), but also resource them to effectively connect young people to existing supports, is key to realizing the role of schools in supporting homeless youth.

Multiple young people discussed their parents' advocacy (or lack of advocacy) around their learning disabilities and accommodations as an integral part of their education. Equitable approaches to accessing diagnoses and other educational supports must consider that some parents may be unlikely to engage school-based identification processes voluntarily and proactively--for example, due to their own histories of trauma in schools, linguistic and cultural barriers, or lack of availability due to working multiple jobs (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015). Further, literature suggests that ableist practices in schools intersect with race in ways that compound barriers for students (Tefera & Fischman, 2020), and our research suggests that newcomers and youth of color faced greater difficulties accessing accommodations and diagnoses. Vee's experiences with discrimination echo common themes in the literature on the experiences of racialized students and families in schools, wherein students face lower expectations and discrimination, and parents' are perceived to be disengaged or uncaring (Picower, 2021). While there must be active engagement and outreach to parents that are rooted in equitable practices (Cooper, 2009), there must also be ways for young people to initiate these processes without requiring their parents' involvement. As most official processes for seeking educational accommodations and supports depend on parental or guardian engagement, some youth will be excluded from the processes or supports they need to be successful in school – particularly because classed, racialized, and gendered norms make much of this work invisible and undervalued (Elliott, Powell, & Brenton, 2015; Griffith & Smith, 2005). Arguably, maintaining schools as structures to perpetuate these classed and privileged pathways also rests on a devaluation of youth's experiences and self-advocacy. For advocacy pathways to be grounded in equity, they must begin by valuing students as experts in their own lives and developing multiple ways for youth and families to participate in their educational trajectories.

Creating sustainable structures to support young people before they become homeless is key to early prevention efforts (Gaetz et al., 2018). This may include creating multiple ways of engaging families in the educational process, including across different languages, cultural contexts, and institutional histories (Advisory Board on English Education, 2013). It must also allow youth to access sustained and practical mental health and academic accommodations and supports. Finally, the effectiveness of any response to youth homelessness in schools must be grounded in believing youth, valuing their experience and knowledge, and supporting their agency and choice. In these ways, schools can realize their potential to be powerful sites of support for young people and agents of homelessness prevention for their students.

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