Under Their Wing: A Case Study of Caring Adults Who Support Homeless Youth

"It's never going to move out. It's just like everyone else in my life: It's never leaving," quipped Julia when I asked why there was a fledgling robin huddled in the crook of her neck. She explained that she had found the robin just over a week ago and brought it inside to care for it. However, now, every time she tried to set it free it flew right back into her home. This was, in a moment and in a phrase, the crux of this study. For nearly a decade, I had witnessed more than a dozen homeless youth fly into her home and nest in her care. She was not the only one who has taken on a similar feat. Three exceptional community partners sat before me awaiting this conversation on how they supported homeless youth: Julia, Candace, and Melissa.

In 2019, the local homeless coalition completed a needs assessment of the students and families identified as homeless in the school where I had served as a school social worker for nearly a decade. During this process students, families, and stakeholders were interviewed in hopes of innovating programs to serve homeless students in schools. One of the programs conceptualized in this process was a school-appointed homeless student advocate program. The students that were interviewed reported that they lacked resources and guidance and the support they needed to get through high school and life after school (LanCo MyHome, personal communication, June, 2019). However, there was very little

guidance on how to create an advocate program for homeless youth. Fortunately, I did have these community partners to help answer the questions: What is a programmatic framework for a school-appointed homeless advocate program? And what are the qualities and activities of advocate for homeless youth?

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The Need: Homeless Youth a Vulnerable Population

Homeless youth are a thrice vulnerable population due to the intersections of deep poverty, age, and homelessness. The risk factors associated with homeless youth show a bleak outlook on their development into adulthood. Homeless youth are more likely to have traumatic histories of abuse and neglect. Edidin, et al. (2012) report that 17-30% of homeless youth report experiencing sexual abuse, and up to 60% report experiencing physical abuse. Homeless youth are twice as likely to be diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, and more than 25% meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (Perlman, et al., 2014). Academically, they are more than twice as likely to have learning disabilities, behavioral problems in school, and attendance issues with some reports indicating only one

in four will graduate from high school (Rahman, et al., 2017; Uretsky, & Stone, 2016) Many homeless youth struggle with substance use and high-risk sexual behavior (Barman-Adhikari, et al., 2016; Ediden, 2012; Thompson, et al., 2010). Extreme feelings of loneliness and hopelessness lead to 40-80% of homeless youth experiencing suicidal ideation with some reports indicating that 23-67% report attempting suicide (Edidin, et al., 2012; Kidd, 2004; Perlman, et al., 2014; Thompson, et al., 2010). Many of these risk factors are complex and enmeshed. However, what these risk factors also indicate is that homeless youth are survivors. It is incumbent on service providers and agencies to support them in developing their resilience, and yet there are few interventions to support them.

Aside from the lack of interventions to support them and the compounding risk factors, a gap exists in services for youth who are enrolled in school, not living with their parents, and who receive special education services (Atlena, et al., 2019; Cronley & Evans, 2017). The Pennsylvania Department of Education requires that these students be appointed a “surrogate parent” (Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2020). This “surrogate” individual is charged with advocating for the youth and making all educational decisions regarding the child. However, there is currently no mechanism in place to identify or train individuals to meet this requirement in Pennsylvania.

Theoretical Framework

Resilience and the Caring Adult

A shift to building the resilience of homeless youth is necessary, as the risk factors of being homeless are well documented (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016; Edidin et al., 2012; Kidd, 2004; Perlman et al., 2014, Rahman et al., 2017; Thompson et al., 2010; Uretsky & Stone, 2016). Resilience can be defined as "The capacity of a system to adapt successfully to significant challenges that threaten its function, viability, or development" (Masten, 2018, p. 12). The literature on resilience seeks out those factors that buffer the development of a child from trauma and stress. Throughout the resiliency literature one factor surfaces time after time: the impact of a caring adult on the positive development of a child (Brendtro, 2006; Brooks, 2006; Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2017; Elster, 2008). Although few interventions exist for homeless youth and even fewer utilize a resiliency framework, some interventions are utilized consistently with success to support similarly at-risk populations: mentoring and the Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) Program (Atlena et al., 2019; Cronley & Evans, 2017). The existing literature on these programs can provide information on the characteristics of caring adults who are effective at improving the well-being of at-risk youth.

Social Capital Theory

Social capital theory recognizes that one's social network is able to supply them with both material and non-material forms of capital. In short, in social capital theory, relationships are resources (Robbins et al., 2006). Reminiscent of the classic Prince and Pauper storyline, two youths who are identical, could have different developmental outcomes based on the resources in their social network (Putnam, 1995). Researchers have found that homeless youth have very little social capital, and the little they have diminished the longer that they are homeless (Barman-Adhikari et al., 2016). Social workers value relationships and "understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change" (NASW, 2017, ethical principles, paragraph 5). The participants in the proposed study have been a valuable source of social capital

Review of the Literature

Relationships and Resilience

The literature written about the impact of caring, supportive relationships on the life of a child is expansive. The Kauai Resiliency Studies began in 1955 and were a foundational longitudinal study that followed children from birth into adulthood. The researchers were able to identify key factors that impacted the positive development of a child despite growing up in stressful environments. One enduring finding was that children with a caring, supportive adult had successful outcomes; the relationship was impactful far into the child's adulthood (Lee,

2012; Werner, 2012). Researchers agree that a nurturing relationship with an adult has a positive impact on child development, which may be particularly true for homeless youth who have a higher likelihood of fractured and even traumatic family relationships (Aviles de Bradley, 2011; Bartle-Haring, 2012; Elster, 2008;). Ferguson and Xie (2012) completed a study that examined the impact of adult support on substance use of homeless teens. They found that youth who had adult support were less likely to use substances or to be truant. On the other hand, homeless youth who were truant and used substances, were more at risk for partner abuse and gang affiliation. The researchers attributed the results to the homeless youth obtaining "social capital" through the supportive adult relationships. Quality relationships are crucial for development; they buffer youth from both being exposed to threat and undergoing risk. Mentoring and the CASA program are two interventions that capitalize on the caring adult relationship to make an impact on similarly at-risk populations.

Mentoring

Mentoring programs are widely used in a variety of formats. Characteristics of the mentoring relationship seem to affect outcomes more successfully than programmatic features. For example, in mentoring relationships, quality and length of relationship seem to be far more impactful than content (Rhodes and DuBois, 2006; Rhodes and Grossman, 2002)

In a review of mentoring literature, Rhodes and DuBois (2006) find that mentoring relationships are most effective when they are close and enduring. They noted that mentors who had some professional experience in helping others were effective at establishing close relationships. Furthermore, there was greater relationship quality when the content of the mentoring session was youth driven rather than mentor driven expectations and desires. Similarly, Philip (2008) states that reciprocity in the mentoring relationship is important, and stresses that the mentor works "with" the youth, rather than "for" the youth.

Some research indicates that mentors view their role as a calling. In a study similar to the present study, Frels et al. (2013) interviewed 11 mentors in order to better understand how to engage and retain mentors in a school-based mentoring program. Emerging themes indicated that the mentors believed the relationship was of personal impact to them, emotional rewards sustained their involvement, mentoring was spiritual in that it served a greater purpose, and mentors had a personal commitment and were focused on being present with their mentees. Wesley et al. (2016) also interviewed mentors of a school-based mentoring program. This study revealed that mentors believed active listening was the most important component to the relationship with their mentee. They also utilized conflict resolution, emotional regulation, and future orientation as the content of mentoring sessions.

One positive characteristic of successful mentor programs is when they are enduring. Rhodes and Grossman (2002) found that the length of time of a mentor match was very important, and those that were short were often actually harmful to the child. However, in relationships that lasted longer than a year, mentees reported increased self-esteem, academic competence, social acceptance, positive parent relationships, a value for school, and decreases in substance use. Relationships that lasted less than three months demonstrated a drop in self-esteem and academic competence, and those that lasted less than six months had increases in substance use. Herrera et al. (2007) also found that the longer the mentor/mentee relationship, the greater the positive impact. Through their study using multiple Big Brother's Big Sister's agencies, they found that long and close relationships were effective at improving attendance, academics, and mentees reported having a positive adult in their life. In contrast, it is possible that short term mentor matches may do more harm than good (Moore, 2013).

CASA

The literature regarding characteristics of CASA volunteers is sparse; however, this program is used nationwide. CASA was established in 1977 out of a need for representation in determining the best interest of children in the child welfare court system. The CASA program deploys 93,300 volunteers and serves 271,800 children annually (Litzelfelner, 2002; National CASA Association,

2020). CASAs serve only one child (or sibling group) at a time so that they can focus their energies on how to best represent that child (National CASA Association, 2020).

Although the training and support in mentoring programs varies greatly, CASA volunteers are screened carefully, and they receive 30 hours of training before beginning and 12 more hours annually (Corr, 2014; National CASA Association, 2020). Initial training includes topics regarding their role, the function of the court system, understanding children and families, fathering, reporting, and monitoring, and communicating. CASAs also report to a supervisor who provides insight and direction (National CASA Association, 2020)

In comparison to mentor activities which are more diverse, the activities of the CASA are more defined. CASA volunteers are charged with learning about the child, engaging them in relationships, making recommendations for support and services, collaborating with service providers, and reporting their findings to the court (National CASA Association, 2020).

The CASA program has a long-standing precedence in its role in the court system, and volunteers who have a clearly defined mission. Although the literature reports mixed effectiveness of the CASA program, some consistent impact has been found children with a CASA volunteer are connected to more

services, are more likely to be adopted, have better goal planning, and have less placements (Litzefilner, 2002; Lawson & Berrick, 2013).

The literature consistently demonstrates that a supportive adult relationship has an immeasurable positive impact in the development of a child. Mentoring is widely used, with varying programmatic features and mixed results in effectiveness. However, the literature clearly indicates that relationships that are close and lengthy are of great impact. Rhodes and DuBois (2006) offer recommendations based on the literature when seeking mentors: require a 12-month commitment, utilize mentors who have backgrounds in professional helping careers, train and support mentors, involve parents (or have mentors willing to be involved with parents), and recognize that youth can be harmed as well as helped. In contrast to mentoring, the CASA program is more structured, and seemingly more legitimized in its role and function. Having a caring adult to oversee the life of a child and to advocate for him, clearly harnesses the caring adult relationship for the betterment of the child.

Interventions that Support Homeless Youth

Despite the utility of meaningful relationships, mentoring, and CASA, the literature does not, however, provide insight into effective interventions for homeless youth. Atlena et al. (2019) conducted a review of the literature in 2009 and a follow up review in 2018, yielding 11 and 13 studies respectively.

Interventions included intensive case-management, independent living programs, cognitive behavioral counseling, independent living skills and programs, supportive housing, peer-based support, motivational interviewing, and mentoring programs were included in the findings. The conclusion of the authors was that most of the qualities of the studies were rated as poor and none were identified as effective. Some slight improvements were found for homeless youth who participated in substance abuse treatment with mentoring. A slight increase in social well-being in interventions that targeted social support. Both gives further evidence that relational interventions may have a positive impact. An earlier review by Toro et al. (2007) found that youth who were provided case-management had increased psychological well-being and decreased problem behaviors. Shelter based case managements also had positive outcomes on housing. The authors noted that there were no known school-based interventions at that time. Another review of interventions by Slesnick et al. (2009) noted that most interventions were focused on reducing risk factors such as mental health, risky sexual behaviors, and substance use. One such example was motivation interviewing, but it was not successful due to the brevity of the intervention and the need to develop trust. Slesnick et al. (2009) concludes that interventions that target one area of risk are simply insufficient, an ecosystem perspective is needed.

Although much literature exists on mentoring programs or homelessness in general, very little literature exists on interventions for homeless youth, and none are used as a targeted approach to build the resilience and social capital of homeless youth. Because of the formative nature of this intervention research with homeless youth, much innovation is required. Despite the apparent need, the literature demonstrates a gap in intervention development, and more specifically, the need for a framework of an effective advocate for homeless youth.

Reflexivity Statement

As both a school social worker for and member of the community, my vantage point in this research contains bias. I am a white, middle-class female who has never experienced homelessness. I also have a wealth of social capital, and admittedly, have a preoccupation with using relationships to create change; however, that may also be because I am not presently hungry, thirsty, or unsheltered. Noticeably absent from this study are the voices of youth who are homeless. I acknowledge that the participants and I will be developing a practice framework that is meant for the well-being of homeless youth, but it is without input from the youths. The selection of participants is also based on what I view as an effective framework for a student advocate. The power dynamics of my position and my status are intrinsic to this study; therefore, any conclusions which

are drawn should first consider the subjective, privileged lens from which it operates.

Methodology

Case studies are a qualitative research approach that focuses on a specific case or several cases for the purpose of developing a connection to theory or specifically a framework for practice (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). The initial phases of intervention development include refining program theory and components using case studies and pilot studies (Frasier et al., 2009). I hope to replicate and expand on the efforts of the participants by clearly understanding the qualities and activities of these relationships that take a student who is homeless from surviving to thriving. How have these caring adults built the resilience of homeless youth? And what are the qualities and activities of advocate for homeless youth?

Data Collection

A one-time, semi-structured focus group was used to collect the data. Focus groups are desirable when the interactions between participants provide the best information and time is limited (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Padgett, 2016). In the focus group setting I sought clarification from participants as well as analyzed similarities and differences noted by the participants. These actions create a more exhaustive conceptual framework of an advocate.

The focus group was conducted using the internet video conferencing platform *Zoom*. The interview was one hour in length and recorded using the transcription, audio, and video modes. Participants were asked for permission to record the session before beginning to record. The questions selected revolve primarily around the activities, social connections, and qualities of the participants while supporting homeless youth; one would notice that the questions are similar but asked in several different ways (see Appendix B).

The video conferencing platform *Zoom* was used with both its record and transcription features. I imported the audio, video, and written transcription into *NVivo Pro 12* for analysis. The transcription was corrected for errors and laughter and agreement amongst participants was noted.

Participants

The participants for this study were selected due to my knowledge of their work in the community and for their ability to contribute to the development of a framework for a homeless student advocate. To protect their identities, pseudonyms were created: Julia, Candace, and Melissa.

The participants were similar in that they were all females between the ages of 40 and 60 and white. These three participants provided a gradient of intensity in their involvement supporting homeless youth. Julia had reported

providing support for over a dozen homeless youth, with many of them ultimately ending up residing with her family. Julia had worked in a variety of roles within the community. Candace had supported three homeless youth who also eventually ended up residing with her for periods of time. Candace was a consultant providing strategic planning for a variety of organizations. Candace also supported youth who were in middle school, whereas Melissa and Julia supported teens who were close to graduating from high school. Melissa was employed through a local church and had supported one youth, but did not have the youth reside with her, although she was a key component to finding housing for the youth. This diversity of experience was an asset in the interview.

Coding and Analysis

Immediately at the conclusion of the focus group, I began memoing and making note of salient themes that emerged in the conversation. Each step in this process resulted in a memo: focus group, cleaning, reading. I also added to memos as I reflected on the content of the focus group. The process of memoing was cyclical: reflect→memo→reflect on memo→repeat. At times I even took to sketching out these thoughts into diagrams. The qualitative approach was moving which mirrors an analytical process which is also moving and active. Memoing was the vehicle for this process

I began with emergent initial coding, developing codes as I went along, but keeping the codes close to the phrasing of the participants (Charmaz, 2006). I coded segment by segment, utilizing participants' responses as a unit of meaning (Charmaz, 2006). I was able to create major categories of information and use focused coding to again review the data and assign meaning to the codes (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell & Poth, 2017). I then used axial coding to specify relationships amongst the codes, creating a model that informs a series of connections of what one would do to be an advocate for homeless youth (Charmaz, 2006).

Enhancing Trustworthiness

An advocate program itself will be subject to a series of evaluations for its effectiveness, which will affirm or deny the quality of this study. Tracy (2010) also reports that qualitative studies that demonstrate quality meet the following criteria: worthy topic, rich rigor, resonance, sincerity, significant contribution, ethical, and meaningful coherence. The scope of this study was narrow which may impact the significance; however, the literature demonstrates that it is a worthy and necessary topic. The study was also conducted ethically and with sincerity and the findings below demonstrate a coherent framework for practice.

To further enhance trustworthiness, the data was reviewed by a peer for impressions. Secondly, I utilized the theoretical framework stated above as well

as the literature reviewed to critically analyze my findings. Thirdly, I participated in “shop talk” with several colleagues, both in reviewing the findings and creating the diagram (Saldana, 2009). This proved to be very helpful in refining ideas, the more dialogue, the clearer the path became. Lastly, a draft of my findings was approved of by the participants.

Findings

The focus group yielded an initial 42 codes (see Appendix A). The questions asked during the focus group elicited responses regarding the activities the participants did to support the youth, connections that were made for/with the youth, and the qualities of the advocate. Despite using emergent coding, segment-by-segment, to develop the initial codes, themes developed naturally into categories that reflected the interview questions: activities, support people, and qualities of an advocate. These categories then were used to code again to group the initial codes into subcategories to further describe the type of activities, support people, and qualities of the advocate. A framework was developed which explains the relationship between the activities, support people, and qualities of the advocate to develop a complete framework for the school-appointed advocate for homeless youth.

The framework below demonstrates that the qualities of the advocate serve as the foundation for the advocate. These qualities cause advocates to complete

activities themselves (right side of the triangle) and activate others (left side of the triangle). The youth is central in this framework; all activities and support are directed towards them to further the resilience of the youth (see Appendix C). The following sections explain the data from these categories.

Activities

The activities of the participants who supported homeless youth could be described in a nutshell as: what did they *not* do? "Activities" was the largest category for classification; however, activities were highly varied, and they largely depended on the needs of the youth. They were divided into subcategories: life skills, connecting, listening and talking, looking out for the youth, school support, making plans for the future, and creating structure. The first three of these were cited most frequently and are expanded on below. Participants noted that many times the youth asked for help with specific items. However, as Julia points out, many of these youth do not know what they need, since progressing towards adulthood requires too many nuances: "How do I get a job? But that's really, they just know that one little, tiny thing. They don't know any of the nuances that come with what to ask."

Lifeskills. Lifeskills were the most frequently coded subcode and included a variety of actions. Some were seemingly large such as getting a job or learning

to drive; others were small yet just as important, like learning to check your pay stub or learning to cook.

Julia explained the following:

> Um, I mean, I'll just start rambling off: We have documentation for birth certificates, social security cards, things like that. If they were on their parent's health insurance, trying to find who had those cards, where that information was um applying for a driver's license, going to the doctor's office for the physicals that they needed to be able to get their driver's license. If the parents weren't able or willing to go along to that doctor's appointment. There was a notarized paper saying that they were allowed to get the driver's license. In the absence of their parents being there. Filling out job applications being able- transportation is big. How do I get to work? How do I get home from work... I mean just things like that, that's, you know, the practical the day to day

Melissa, who did not have a teen living with her had a similar experience:

> The gentleman he lived with taught him how to cook…Early on we got to move bank accounts, and we did, I do budget education at the church, a Dave Ramsey program. And so he had already been through that. But now we have the real life need for it. So we would meet regularly go over his

> budget, his income, how he's going to work, this and that that helped him tremendously…Teaching him how to drive. We had a whole team of people teaching him to drive…Shopping how to shop for clothing. What to buy. He didn't really know that. Hygiene... hygiene was a big issue he should have known by the he was about hygiene, but he really didn't. So, we've talked a lot about hygiene."

Connecting. The participants also connected the youth to people and resources that were needed. One of the main activities was activating others for the sake of the youth. For example, Candace explains that she contacted the local police with a list of adults the police could call, when the parent called in her youth as a runaway. All three participants mentioned contact with the school to support the youth academically. Other times it was appointing those within their own social network to complete tasks with the youth. For example, Melissa reflects:

> Our philosophy has always been teach them to fish don't do it for him. So we have we have a group of people that have surrounded him with the same philosophy. So when we were in the heart of the matter, we were meeting regularly as a team to find the best approach.

And Candace reported:

> The kid who uh I mentioned his parents his dad's up in Maine growing marijuana, uh He was even more free range than, than the kid who was here first. And so what we ended up having to do was create a group of adults. Parents who would be willing to take him because he just could not stay still in one place very long.

Listening and talking. There was seemingly no topic that was off the table for the participants. Aside from explaining the nuances and responsibilities of becoming an adult, participants shared insight on sensitive topics. Candace remembered the difficulties of "helping them deal with girls at that age".

Reflecting on what she would do if given the opportunity to support a youth again, Candace stated: "I'd say just taking the time to listen, like we talked about before, and really empathizing with them. I would do that. I can take that extra time no matter what."

Support People

Participants were asked specifically about connections that were made with the youth. This generated a category of support people that the participant engaged in supporting youth. The subcategories were individuals from their own support network, agency personnel, as well as a wish list of people they wish they could have engaged in supporting the youth.

Support network. Several examples were noted above of participants activating others from their own support network. In addition to these, Melissa also notes:

> We got him what he needed and the other connections through our church. I just put a call out and said, I have a youth in need who wants to be part of this young man's life and I had all kinds of people talk to me and some of them decided not to. But most of them decided to move forward.

Conversely, Julia felt as if she did not have the consistent support from her network:

> I do have, like, a group of friends was like, hey, we have this kid. Does anybody have sneakers or clothes. Or, you know, things like that. But as far as saying like, oh, we had a team of people and we were all worked together. You know, I just felt like most the time I was going under (laughing).

Similarly, support networks often experienced burnout from caring for the youth.

Melissa states:

> You know like, I had that community and they were all rallying around him, but I have to tell you, he burned so many bridges that I am the only one left in that community. So, we had 15 to 20 of us, and now it's down to me. And he calls on me when needed.

Agency Personnel. Participants reported that they connected youth to various formal agencies and personnel. As noted above Candace helped the police become advocates for a youth who frequently ran away. Similarly, Melissa, helped the young man she supported navigate the legal system. Julia had gone so far as to meet with state representatives to raise awareness about the plight of homeless youth and the gap in services provided for them. Contact with the school was also important, and both Julia and Melissa noted that contact with me as a school social worker was often the lone agency resource they had. Julia states: “In my experience, I feel like Christina. You were probably my biggest support with any of the kids that we have. And so, unless it was something you or I could think of…”

Wish list. The absence of support people was as weighty of a topic as those that did support the homeless youth. On the wish list of support people for participants were drivers, shoppers, employers, mental health professionals, and finance people. Julia states:

> Say, okay, when we have these kids, this is who we call because we need sneakers and this is what we call because we need somebody to help them to open a bank account. And this is who we call this is the insurance guy.

Participants also noted the need for legal counsel to help inform the advocate of the rights and responsibilities when entrenched in caring for the youth. Julia states:

> I wish that we even had like some sort of a legal counsel that would kind of just pull something up and protect us as families, you know, that says, these people are just, it's that good Samaritan law if I give you CPR and I end up, you know, breaking your neck and you're paralyzed. I don't want to be held responsible for that. I was just trying to help you out. You know what I mean…

Participants remarked on the insufficiency of the support people that were in place, such as Child Protective Services.

> I've been going to State representatives and things and saying like, hey, what's the plan for these kids and they're like, well, we have our children and youth system. And I'm like, I think you have an I think you're overly idealistic in how you think children and youth works for unaccompanied youth if they're not in an immediate imminent danger. They are not a

> children and youth case. And so now it really does fall to the other people who are going to bear that responsibility and that leaves them very vulnerable…Basically, they say, well, he's with you. Are you okay with that? Well yeah, I mean, that's fine. He's here he's safe that's, you know, and it's like, Okay, good. And they don't call you back. They do not. They're like, Oh, good. Someone else has this one. And you don't hear from them again, you know.

Qualities

Participants were asked what they thought the qualities of an advocate would be, but, in fact, their own stories provide a window into the qualities of an advocate. The subcategories that emerged are reflected in the participants' own words: grin and bear it, parental, conscience, flexible, empathy, and not quite right.

Grin and bear it. This category reflects what could be defined as perseverance. Participants noted a long-term commitment to the youth they supported, outlasting other relationships that gave up. Despite difficult choices and behaviors of the youth, participants indicate that they still were in contact with youth even into adulthood. Julia reports:

> Once you bring someone into your house and you know you're their only hope. That's a really weird place to be. So it's like okay, they're going to steal from you, they're going to do this. They're going to steal from your kids... they're going to cause all of these issues. they're going to do that. And unless you grin and bear it. What happens to them next could be so much worse.

Really listen. One activity noted frequently by participants was listening and talking to the teen. Being someone who would listen to them was of the utmost importance. Candace describes:

> And just listening to kids. I mean, you gotta be. It's not just liking teenagers. I like them but you gotta, you gotta be willing to really listen to them and peel back what they're what they're really trying to say because they're trying to figure it out themselves.

Parental The participants in many ways took on parenting responsibilities with the teen. Interestingly, one characteristic was that each participant was connected with teenagers or had teenagers of their own, and that was how they met the teen they supported. Participants reported giving boundaries and structure to teens, making sure they were eating, ensuring they were not being taken advantage of, and looking out for their safety. Parents also complete activities in the process of raising a child, but parents do these activities because of a deep and

abiding care for their child. In the same way, the participants experienced this kind of care of these youth. Melissa states: “Some of its life coach, some of its mentoring, some of its parenting and just treating these kids like they're your kids, even though they're not.”

Conscience. Participants felt responsible for the youth that they supported. It was a matter of moral conviction: an inner feeling that they had to do what was right for the child. Julia describes it well:

> So you really end up being at the mercy of your conscience. In a way that's like because it really is your conscience that keeps you going. It's like if they're not here, where will they be? And because there isn't anything next... Juvenile detention, that’s what happens next.

Flexibility. Participants reported that flexibility was an important aspect of supporting youth that were homeless: setting structure and expectations, but also being able to problem solve when difficult situations would arise. Candace reflects:

> Yeah. It can't be so flexible that you get walked over and then there are no rules…I mean, it does break my heart when I see things happen, but it absolutely does. But then if you're not: Okay. Well, how do we try and fix

that? Before you move along in a different way. That's flexibility and problem solving and just listening to kids.

Empathy. Melissa reported that "empathy and listening" were the top two characteristics an advocate should have. Participants noted accepting the youth where they were, despite their circumstances. They were able to put themselves in the shoes of the youth. Julia describes:

> Whoever you are, wherever you've been, whatever you've done it really doesn't matter to me. You are here. It's that map at the amusement park that has a little red X: And you are here. And when you are here. You are not anywhere else and you are not anybody else, but who you are right here and right now. And I just think there's something about a clean slate. Um I've needed that in my life and I always want to be able to offer that too because when they walk in. I don't care what I've heard about you. I don't care what you're scared I'm going to find out about you. You're here.

Not quite right. By this point, it is clear that these individuals are to some extent extraordinary, and they are completing tasks and listening to youth that are for the most part invisible to the rest of the world. How does one encapsulate this quality? With some comedic relief, Julia proposed the following:

> I think you need someone who's just not quite right (laughing). I mean it. Because I think about myself and I think like if I was normal, I wouldn't do this. You know, like, because you do, you have to have almost some really sick sense of idealism…It's gonna be all the things last time wasn't, and then when it's not,qua you want to like… there's a part of you that says let's do it again! Like there has to be insanity. I don't know. I don't know what it is.

Discussion

In creating a framework for an effective advocate, it seems to be of less importance what the advocate does in supporting the youth, but more so who they are. It is their qualities that propel them towards activating others and completing activities to support the youth. The participants noted many people were involved along the way in support of the youth, some who were even employed to do so such as Children and Youth (Child Protective Services). However, not many endured the journey. Consider the robin in our opening vignette. One must feed the robin, give it water, provide it with a safe space to rest, but why would someone do this? And what makes Julia the type of person that defies nature, that this robin would feel safe perched on her shoulder? Particularly, when in the case of these homeless youth, many of the adults that were supposed to provide love and safety, exposed them to abuse and betrayal (Bartle-Haring, et al., 2012).

The literature on effective mentors, echoes many of the same qualities espoused by the participants of this study. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) point out that commitment is an important aspect because as the relationship between the mentor and mentee mature, the positive impacts grow as well. They found that relationships that lasted longer than a year, reported improvements in behaviors, psychosocial factors, and academics (Grossman & Rhodes, 2012). Bartle-Haring et. al (2012) reports that success as a mentor is a product of a consistent, close, and enduring relationship. Similarly, Herrera et. al (2007) found that mentees in the *Big Brothers, Big Sisters* program with high quality, longer relationships received more benefit from the program. Phillips (2018) uses the term "durable" to describe relationships that create more positive outcomes. These findings are consistent with the concept of "grin and bear it" or perseverance reflected by the participants.

The quality of really listening, flexibility, conscientiousness, and empathy also appear in the literature on mentors. Really listening is reflected in the concept of active listening. Wesley, et al. (2016) explains that active listening is when the listener gives complete attention to the speaker and responds through relevant questions and verbal and non-verbal responses. Wesley et al. (2016) found that mentors believed that this was the basis for the strong relationship with mentees and facilitated confidence in the mentee. Bartle-Haring et al. (2012) report that

empathy, trust, and mutuality are qualities that improve the social skills in mentees the most. In a study by Frels et al., (2013), mentors reported a spirituality about mentoring. The mentors felt that they had an inner strength that motivated them to keep their commitment to their mentee (Frels et al., 2013). This is similar to Julia's comment about being at the mercy of your conscience, and this being the motivation to keep moving. Lastly, Phillips (2018) reports that relationships with mentors are not linear, they move backward and forwards, sometimes regressing and sometimes progressing. At times the goals and direction of the relationship may change altogether (Phillips, 2018). Successful mentor relationships are characterized by working *with* a youth, rather than *on* a youth (Phillips, 2018). Rhodes and Dubois (2006) report that outcomes from mentoring relationships were best when the mentors provided both structure and support, almost precisely what our participants recommended about being flexible. Advocates must be flexible, and better yet if they are able to flex around the goals of the student.

The literature is less clear about the activities that are completed by mentors, which may be due to the fact that each program has a different mission or purpose. Phillips (2018) reports that mentoring relationships were most successful when there was mutual respect, and the mentee had some control over the activities. Activities that are youth-centered are predictors of relationship

quality and duration (Rhodes and DuBois, 2006). Nothing in the reviewed literature discussed the mentee being connected to other social supports, this could be due to the more stationary nature of mentor relationships. However, in programs such as CASA, one of the most prominent positive outcomes is that children are connected with more resources and support than children that do not have a CASA (Litzlefelner, 2002). Therefore, activating others in pursuit of the best interests of the child may be a key difference between an advocate and a mentor.

Social capital theory and resilience theory are relevant to the school-appointed advocate program. Resilience was defined above as "The capacity of a system to adapt successfully to significant challenges that threaten its function, viability, or development" (Masten, 2018, p.12). The care from a secure, adult relationship is one the most consistent indicators of resilience of a child. The most frequently coded quality of the participants was their ability to "grin and bear it", or to persevere in their relationship with the youth. Is it possible that an advocate lends their own resilience to the youth? They can face significant challenges, and adapt, thereby making the youth resilient. Furthermore, Social Capital theory proposes that relationships *are* resources. Participants in this study utilized their social network to varying degrees, with varying success. However, one cannot utilize social capital when there are no bridges into social networks. Therefore,

the social network and even the activities that one could do are inconsequential, unless you have the type of individual that is willing to be the bridge and undertake the tasks to support the youth.

The framework of the school-appointed advocate is then that an individual who possesses the qualities of persistence, empathy, flexibility, listening, and conscientiousness will then activate others and complete activities that are centered on the youth, therefore championing the youth to increase their resilience.

These qualities listed above are not exhaustive. However, they are found in both the data from this study and the literature. One might imagine that if an advocate had these qualities and more, their foundation, the base of the triangle, would be wider. Perhaps this would allow them to support a youth with more needs, without overwhelming their capacity to be a support. Similarly, if the advocate has fewer of these qualities, their foundation would be narrower, and they would need to be matched with a youth with less intense needs. Advocates may also be able to supplement their capacity with more support people and activities that are youth centered.

Implications

Future research should consider the following four initiatives. First, as a school-appointed homeless advocate program is developed and then implemented, research should be conducted on the effectiveness of this advocate framework. Much of the literature reviewed considered qualities of an effective mentor, largely because of the absence of an advocate framework in general, and specifically an advocate framework for homeless youth. This framework is meant to be a starting point but will need further revision as the program is piloted and revised. Secondly and more generally, the literature lacks direction on advocacy as an intervention, and what qualities an advocate should have. Future research should explore qualities of an advocate, which is difficult at this point because very few interventions of this nature are presently in existence to examine. Thirdly, research should be directed at how to identify effective qualities in volunteers. Many times, programs have difficulty specifying criteria because volunteers give their time and effort at no cost. Thus, program implementation is at the mercy of the volunteer. However, this study and prior research indicate that qualities matter, and worse yet that a youth may experience harm if relationship quality is not considered. Participants of this study further indicated that matching the right advocate with the right youth is important. An easy but effective method of identifying qualities will prevent harm to youth who have already experienced chaotic relationships with adults. Lastly, to maintain the capacity and durability of advocates, a support and training plan should be developed. Participants of this

study indicated that they at times felt like they were drowning, or that others in the support network became burned out by caring for the youth. One of the key differences between mentoring programs and the CASA program was that the CASA program required 30 hours of training to begin, and 12 hours annually, as well as monthly supervisory meetings. If someone is going to support a youth with the intensity that these participants did, then support and training will be crucial

This study not only indicates an important step in intervention research for homeless youth, it is also a call for school social workers to lead the development of school-based programs that meet the needs of vulnerable populations such as homeless youth. As a value-based profession, our leadership is particularly important as we incorporate service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 2012). Due to their bureaucratic nature, educational institutions cannot meet the needs of at-risk students. However, social workers can facilitate relationships that strengthen resilience.

Limitations

It is expected that this study will have narrow applicability. This is in part due to the selected sample. The sample size is small, and furthermore was selected purposely from my own pool of experience and acquaintances. The

homogeneity in demographics of participants may have inhibited the richness of the data. Whereas I expect to gain much insight from these participants, the transferability of this study will be low. The results should not be generalized to the public at large. Instead, the intention is to develop an advocate framework for homeless students in school systems.

One of the confounding variables was that two of the participants housed the homeless youth, so one may ask whether the same supportive measures would be utilized if the sample would have included more individuals that supported the youth without housing them. Also, within the homeless population in schools, there are youth who are homeless with their families, and youth who are considered “unaccompanied”. The participants of this study had experience with unaccompanied youth, which leaves the question of whether these results would be effective in advocating for youth who were homeless but with their families.

Determining the effectiveness of these supportive individuals may be difficult. Participants noted that many of the youth remain in precarious situations. Even if an ideal framework is developed, well-being for homeless students is complex and difficult to attain. Where they would be otherwise, and in what condition they would be in if not for these individuals are more accurate questions, but much less measurable. The youth themselves may have to

determine what is beneficial to them. For this reason, the perspectives of the youth are imperative, but they were not included in this study.

Conclusion: Homeless Youth a Social Justice Mission

"The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, preamble, paragraph 1). This is our charge, to advance human well-being of the vulnerable. Due to their stage of development, poverty, and homeless status, the risk factors and outcomes for homeless youth require action from social workers. Social workers value human relationships and recognize that relationships are "the vehicle for change… social workers should seek to strengthen relationships with people in a purposeful manner" (National Association of Social Workers, 2017, preamble, paragraph 5). The findings and literature above gives extensive evidence to relationships being a vehicle for change; however, substantial evidence exists that shows inadequate relationships can cause harm. Therefore, providing best practice direction for how to develop caring, adult relationships is essential. This study asked the questions: What is a programmatic framework for a school-appointed homeless advocate program? And what are the qualities and activities of advocate for homeless youth? By investigating activities and

qualities of those who are already doing the work well, a framework was developed for an effective advocate, basing the foundation of the advocate on their qualities, specifically persistence, empathy, listening, and conscientiousness. These qualities cause advocates to complete activities themselves and activate others to further the resilience of youth. This is the making of a champion for teens: a person who takes a youth without a home and brings them under their wing.

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Appendix A: Code Book

Focus Group

Nodes

Name	Description
Activities	What the person did with the teen

Name	Description
Connecting	Connecting to things that the youth needs
Establishing structure	Setting rules or expectations
Life skills	Those items that help the youth get to adulthood
Listening and Talking	Items such as listening and empathizing
Looking out for	activities that showed a care and general protection for the well being of the youth.
Making plans for the future	planning for college or for the future
School support	Activities that supported the academics of youth.
Barriers	Barriers that were noted
Consequences to the helper	Ways that those that supported the teen were hurt or got burnt out
Didn't know how to help	Denotes the support person not knowing how to help the teen, or where they felt they were limited in helping
Difference	Instances where a different answer was given, or a different experience was had than the other participants.

Name	Description
How did you know how to help	Responses to the how the support person identified ways to help the teen. How did they know what to do?
How the relationship started	Denotes how the adults met the teen and got involved.
Nuances	All the little processes and things that the youth needed help with
Activating Others	People that helped or resourced the teen through the participant
A support network	Individuals who were friends or in the community of the participant that supported the youth
Activities support people did	The activities that were done by the people that were in the support network of the participant
Agency personnel	People that were a part of organizations that supported the youth
Wish list people	Participants indicated that they wished a person was available to support a specific need.
Profession or community service	Note what the person does in the community for work or otherwise.
Qualities	

Name	Description
Conscience	The participant felt as if they were the child's only hope, if not them then who?
Empathy	Notes the qualities of empathy
Flexible	Participant notes flexibility of advocate- being able to balance perspective and approaches.
Grin and bear it	A length of time is expressed, or how a student or individual is still in contact
Not quite right	The participant notes someone has to be “crazy”
Parental	A connection to the parenting qualities of the participant
Really listen	You have to be willing to listen
Reasons teen was homeless	Denotes how or why the teen was homeless
Absent parent	Parent just wasn’t there
Domestic Violence	Notes that the teen experienced domestic violence
Drugs or Alcohol	Notes that the drug or alcohol caused homelessness

Name	Description
Homeless parent	Parent was experiencing homelessness
Parent health issues	Parent had something with their health that left them unable to care for their child
Parent incarcerated	Notes that a parent was incarcerated
Same	Instances where participants had the same experience
Stories of teens	Participant tells a narrative of the experience of a teen
Support for helpers	Indicates that some one connected to the teen needed support.
Things to do differently	participants input on things that would be helpful or that they would have done differently that they didn't do
Things to do the same	Things that that participant noted that they would do again to support the teen
Who is responsible	Notes a gap in who was responsible for the care and supervision of the teen... legal issues pertaining to that as well. Liabilities.

Appendix B: Interview Schedule

Table

Interview Schedule

Opening: I will open with introducing myself, the intent of the research project, and review the informed consent. I will then ask participants to introduce themselves, but also noting that they were chosen because of their work with youth that were homeless. Even though we will be meeting online, I hope to create an atmosphere of casual and open sharing.
Conversation Starter: Can we start with introductions as well as your role in the community? Question 1: How did you come to know the homeless youth that you supported? *Possible probe:* · *Did you know the youth prior to them becoming homeless?* Question 2: What types of activities did you do to support the youth? In what ways did they need help? *Possible probe:* · *Did the youth ask for help?* · *Did you or someone else help decide what was needed?*

Question 3: Thinking specifically about connection (give pause here to consider the meaning of connection), what connections were made with the teen?

Possible probe:

- *Were family or kin involved in supporting the youth?*
- *Did someone from your social network support the youth?*

Question 4: Imagine you were creating a job description for the work you did to support a youth that was homeless, how would you describe it?

Possible probe:

- *If someone would want to be a student advocate, how would you describe what is involved?*

Question 5: Typically, a job description also includes qualities and skills. What personality qualities or do you think would be important for a student advocate?

Possible Probe:

- *Did the participant have any specific training themselves?*

Question 6: If presented with the opportunity to support a youth that was homeless again, what would you make sure to do the same? And what would you do differently?

Possible Probe:

· *What is important to know about helping homeless youth?* · *What do you think an advocate will need to be successful*?
Closure: I will summarize rudimentary themes from the conversation and ask participants for clarification and for input on themes they noticed. I will ask if there is anything else they would like to share. After all participants have given input, I will close with small talk and thank them for their participation.

Appendix C

Figure 1: Case study programmatic framework for a School-Appointed Homeless Advocate program.