Youth Homelessness Prevention Through Education: Reimagining Quebec's Education System as a Tool for Youth Homelessness Prevention

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Abstract

This thesis examines how Quebec implements youth homelessness prevention practices within and beyond the education system, identifying key limitations and areas for reform. It explores whether current policies enable schools to play a proactive role in preventing youth homelessness and where additional primary prevention, secondary early intervention efforts, and policy developments are needed. Grounded in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), this research argues that education should not merely reflect existing power structures but actively dismantle them. Schools, as sites of both oppression and liberation, hold transformative potential in preventing youth homelessness by fostering critical consciousness and addressing systemic inequities. Using autoethnography (Cooper, & Lilyea, 2022; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020; Ellis, 2009), this study draws from personal and professional field notes to analyze lived experiences with homelessness, precarity, and educational interventions. The Williams' (2019) Coding and Thematic Exploration is used to identify recurring themes related to systemic gaps in prevention, while the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) (Hankivsky et al., 2014) critically assesses Quebec's Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021–2026). The findings aim to contribute to the growing body of literature on educational early interventions and policy approaches to homelessness prevention, with a focus on Quebec's unique socio-political context.

Résumé de thèse

Cette thèse examine la manière dont le Québec met en œuvre des pratiques de prévention de l'itinérance chez les jeunes, tant à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur du système éducatif, en identifiant les principales limites et les domaines nécessitant des réformes. Elle explore dans quelle mesure les politiques actuelles permettent aux écoles de jouer un rôle proactif dans la prévention de l'itinérance des jeunes et où des efforts supplémentaires en matière de prévention primaire, d'intervention précoce et de développement des politiques sont nécessaires. S'appuyant sur la "*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*" de Paulo Freire (1970), cette recherche soutient que l'éducation ne doit pas simplement refléter les structures de pouvoir existantes, mais qu'elle doit activement contribuer à leur démantèlement. Les écoles, en tant que lieux à la fois d'oppression et de libération, possèdent un potentiel transformateur dans la prévention de l'itinérance des jeunes en développant une conscience critique et en abordant les inégalités systémiques. En adoptant une approche autoethnographique, cette étude s'appuie sur des notes de terrain personnelles et

professionnelles pour analyser les expériences vécues en lien avec l'itinérance, la précarité et les interventions éducatives. L'exploration thématique et le codage de Williams (2019) permettent d'identifier les thèmes récurrents liés aux lacunes systémiques en matière de prévention, tandis que l'Analyse des Politiques Basée sur l'Intersectionnalité (IBPA) (Hankivsky et al., 2014) évalue de manière critique le Plan interministériel du Québec pour en finir avec l'itinérance (2021–2026). Les résultats de cette recherche visent à enrichir la littérature sur les interventions éducatives précoces et les approches politiques de la prévention de l'itinérance, en tenant compte du contexte socio-politique unique du Québec.

Key Words

homelessness, precarity, prevention, youth, lived experience, Québec schools, systemic

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Introduction

Youth homelessness, like the diverse nature of human experiences, is complicated and each case of homelessness can often be examined as it is shaped by three primary categories of causes: systemic, structural, and individual/relational factors (Gaetz, 2014). A youth's experience of homelessness is rarely the result of a single factor and instead is much more common to have emerged from overlapping forces such as policy failures, economic hardship, family conflict, or discrimination that compound over time. Contemporarily, many of the responses, in Canada and Quebec, advocate for a prevention approach to youth homelessness, targeting at improvement of all three categories of causes. Recognizing this interplay is critical because it challenges overly simplistic solutions to homelessness, which, often, address only one dimension of the issue while ignoring the others. By considering these intersecting causes, those invested in addressing youth homelessness can develop more well-rounded and targeted prevention strategies that address not just immediate needs in crisis but also the underlying conditions that push youth into precarity in the first place.

Among the many public institutions that interact with young people, schools are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in preventing youth homelessness. For most young people navigating homelessness, they are at a point in their lives where they are attending school. Young people experiencing homelessness face numerous challenges that can significantly hinder their academic success and emotional well-being. These challenges often lead to long-term negative consequences, such as limited educational attainment, increased risk of mental health issues, and difficulties in securing stable employment throughout their life (Perlman, 2014; Slesnick, 2018). Because of the consistent, daily environment where youth are surrounded by professionals and daily interactions between teachers and students throughout the academic year (Gaetz, 2014), schools provide a key intervention point where at-risk youth can be identified and supported before experiencing housing precarity through early intervention (Schwan et al., 2018). This regular contact allows for early detection of signs that a student might be at-risk of of homelessness, which, when addressed by trained adults (Mackenzie, 2014; Maynard, 2019; Sohn, 2019), can lead to better outcomes by connecting students with the care and support they need, including referrals to important community resources (Gaetz, 2018; Maynard, 2019; Vitopoulos et al., 2018).

Teachers, in particular, are well-placed to observe changes in students' behavior and appearance, such as persistent hunger, fatigue, a lack of clean clothing, or appropriate footwear, that may indicate homelessness. However, my nearly seven years of experience as an educator has shown me that teachers are often unprepared to effectively address complex issues relating to poverty and homelessness. This lack of preparedness is particularly alarming given the increasing prevalence of homelessness among students, a trend I have observed and one that is supported by the rising rates of youth homelessness and rising frequency that young people will experience homelessness more often in their lives (Gaetz et al., 2016; Gouvernement du Québec, 2021). My time within the French school centre de service (or school board) has further underscored the urgency of addressing this issue and highlighted the need for enhanced support and training for educators. Many of the French language school service centers (Quebec has 60 of them) are in the government's own words, situated in “des milieux défavorisé”, or underprivileged areas, of Quebec (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021).

Despite the potential role it can play, Quebec’s education system is not currently designed to support the prevention of youth homelessness in a comprehensive or systemic way. Schools lack the structured systems, policies, and training necessary to provide effective early intervention and support. My thesis focuses specifically on the systemic causes of homelessness, particularly the responsibility of the education system to address them as contributing factors that shape individual experiences of unstable housing. I argue that schools must play a greater role in youth homelessness prevention than they currently do, and that more responsibility should be placed on the education system to address systemic challenges impacting youth. It is crucial to recognize that preventing homelessness requires a comprehensive approach. As those concerned, including educators, schools, concerned parents, policymakers, voters, and advocates, we must understand that youth homelessness cannot be fully addressed unless we act on and improve multiple public systems contributing to the causes of youth homelessness.

This thesis situates the education system within a broader network of public social structures that either mitigate or exacerbate youth homelessness, linked to systemic forces that can oppress or emancipate students (Freire, 1970). By focusing on education as an entry point for prevention, I highlight how schools can be leveraged not in isolation, but as part of a larger, coordinated effort to address the systemic and root causes of precarity to create meaningful, long-term change for Quebecois youth. Thus, my contribution to the research will explain why it

is important to highlight systemic inequities as an integral part of youth homelessness prevention. These systemic inequities, such as inadequate social safety nets, discriminatory housing policies, and the underfunding of public education, manifest in schools through barriers like inconsistent access to social support that schools could benefit from, punitive disciplinary practices that disproportionately impact marginalized students and lead to high push out rates, and a lack of trauma-informed approaches (Maynard, 2019). In this thesis, I will examine how these systemic failures contribute to youth homelessness and explore how schools, as key institutions in young people's lives, can either perpetuate these inequities or serve as sites of meaningful liberation and prevention. Drawing on Freire, liberation in education is a practice of freedom. Liberation in education means moving beyond rote learning to create spaces where learners critically examine their realities and work towards dismantling systems of oppression. It transforms education from a tool of social control into one of empowerment, fostering agency, critical thinking, and collective action for justice.

To ground this argument, I employ the prevention typology proposed by Dej & Gaetz (2022), which organizes prevention efforts into three phases of prevention categories: primary, secondary, and tertiary strategies. These encompass structural, systemic, early intervention, eviction prevention, and housing stabilization as useful for understanding what types of prevention work may happen in schools (Dej & Gaetz, 2022). This helps clarify where schools and other institutions can intervene most effectively, ensuring that prevention efforts are not just reactive but proactive and targeted at breaking cycles of precarity before they begin. This thesis focuses specifically on primary and secondary prevention efforts, as these are the most likely to target systemic causes of youth homelessness before a crisis occurs. Primary prevention aims to reduce the likelihood of homelessness by addressing root causes affecting vulnerable populations before they reach a crisis, while secondary prevention focuses on early intervention strategies that help stabilize young people who are at imminent risk (Gaetz & Dej, 2020). Schools are particularly well-suited for these types of early interventions remain underutilized in provincial and ministerial homelessness strategies that dictate the activities and approaches employed in education fields. Here, I explore how schools might mitigate risk factors for vulnerable youth by tackling underlying issues within educational and social systems, within the context where I work–Quebec.

Positioning the Research

As a researcher who experienced homelessness and precarity during my late youth and early adulthood, I have sought a comprehensive solution to end youth homelessness in Quebec through prevention. My work is informed by both lived experience and professional experience as an educator across Quebec's various educational spaces in both the public and private school sectors, across both the French and English sectors, and in institutions ranging from pre-K to post-secondary education. These experiences have led me to grapple with a fundamental question: What role can schools realistically play in preventing youth homelessness and precarity? More specifically, which aspects of youth homelessness should schools aim to prevent, and how can this be effectively integrated into classrooms, gymnasiums, and schoolyards where I have worked for nearly seven years? Understanding the limits and possibilities of educational spaces is crucial to identifying actionable, school-based strategies for prevention.

This inquiry stems from my own encounters with homelessness, as well as observations made over nearly seven years of teaching in underfunded and underserved school environments. My experiences have reinforced my belief that prevention efforts should not only address immediate needs but also focus on the broader systemic inequities as part of youth homelessness that create vulnerability in the first place. My experiences have reinforced my belief that prevention efforts should not only address immediate needs but also focus on the broader systemic inequities as part of youth homelessness that create vulnerability in the first place, since knowing how systems can push some youth into homelessness leads to more effective intervention and prevention. Ultimately, while I wish to explore how schools can immediately act more effectively on youth homelessness prevention, I also believe they can address systemic barriers more effectively through actualizing their potential role as spaces of educational justice and mobilization of students for emancipatory purposes.

Throughout my research, I have asked myself the question: "What causes youth homelessness?" I believe that understanding the causes in a given context, like Quebec, is essential for developing effective prevention strategies which end homelessness before it starts. This has led to this thesis, which explores the responsibility of the education system in preventing youth homelessness systemically, examining how schools can act as sites of

emancipation and intervention rather than perpetuating oppression through existing inequities. When exploring oppression and emancipation in the context of education, particularly in relation to youth homelessness prevention, it's useful to consider how systemic structures either limit or expand opportunities for marginalized students. Where oppression is the systemic and structural causes for youth homelessness and emancipation being more critical empowering pedagogies, better trained trauma enforced practices within educational settings and policy advocacy pushing for systemic change.

Specifically, I ask *the following research questions:*

1. How does Quebec implement youth prevention practices both in and out of schools, and how can the education system play a more proactive role in youth homelessness prevention?
2. What limitations exist within current political, educational, and systemic prevention efforts, and where are additional prevention, early intervention efforts and policy developments needed to better support youth experiencing homelessness?
3. How does Quebec's current educational and housing policies equip schools to address the systemic causes of youth homelessness and housing precarity, if at all?

To answer my research questions, I employ two primary methods. Firstly, I draw from field notes of my personal and professional experiences relating to education and housing, wherein I use Williams autoethnographic coding and thematic exploration method (2019) to analyze how schools function as spaces of both oppression and potential liberation for young people experiencing homelessness. These field notes were coded and thematically explored using the Libre QDA qualitative analysis tool to identify recurring themes. The emerging themes later built the heart of what was narratively described in the vignettes. Secondly, I conducted a policy analysis to critically analyze Quebec's "Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance" (2021-2026) using the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework (Hankivsky et al., 2014). The IBPA framework, through its guiding principles and 12 questions, provides a structured approach to assessing the policy's context, assumptions, and implications. This allows for a deeper understanding of the ways in which provincial policies do, or do not, account for the role of education as liberating in preventing youth homelessness. By applying this method in conversation with my autoethnographic analysis, I identify key policy failures where schools and educational institutions might be failing in their attempt to prevent and better support young people experiencing homelessness.

By using these methods, I demonstrate how systemic failures in both education and government policy contribute to youth homelessness. More importantly, I highlight the ways in which schools can be transformed into proactive sites of liberation from systemic oppression, offering early supports that prevent young people from entering cycles of precarity. Currently, without structural changes and targeted investments, the potential of schools to act as preventative sites remains largely unrealized. As a transformative proactive place to fight systems of oppression, schools are an ideal place to start addressing policy failures and reducing youth homelessness.

Outline of the Thesis and Key Points

In this thesis, I have woven together a range of theories, methods, and approaches to investigate my topic of how schools and educational institutions might be redesigned to prevent and better support young people experiencing homelessness. By integrating these elements, I aim to provide a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand while demonstrating the value of combining different qualitative research strategies. The thesis begins with an autoethnographic chapter exploring youth homelessness in and out of the classroom. Through this, I position myself within the research, drawing on both personal and professional experiences to critically engage with broader social and institutional contexts as a person who has and is experiencing the dichotomy of being a qualitative researcher and a not so long ago precariously housed person. In this chapter I engage in ethnographic reflexivity and draw on vignettes and my journals as data to ground this work. Following this, I present a policy scan of Quebec's Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026) to examine how existing frameworks address, or fail to address, key issues related to my investigation. Finally, I conclude by reflecting on the insights gained throughout the thesis and their implications for research, policy, and practice, through proposing a practical and pedagogical toolkit for educators. By integrating Freirean principles into educational practices and proposing concrete tools for educators, like the created toolkit, this research highlights the urgent need for youth-centered, critical approaches that move beyond reactive responses and instead focus on primary prevention within school settings.

Each chapter of this thesis builds on the argument that education is never neutral; it is always political (Freire, 1970) and plays a role in reproducing systemic inequities that contribute

to youth homelessness. Schools can either serve as sites of liberation or oppression, shaping how youth either dismantle or reinforce these systems through their curricula and pedagogical approaches they can then use everyday. Education has already been recognized as a key space for homelessness prevention, given the consistent contact schools have with young people (Dej & Gaetz, 2022; Gaetz, 2014). Therefore, integrating Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970) into youth homelessness prevention efforts in Quebec could help transform education into a mechanism for systemic change, moving beyond the reproduction of power structures to actively dismantling them. This would position youth with lived experience as central agents in both their own learning and the social transformation which occur as a result of this liberation.

Addressing youth homelessness is not just a moral imperative for Quebecers, as referred to by its own Government plan to end homelessness (2021, p.8) in the section on "Se responsabiliser collectivement"; it is vital for the health and stability of our communities as a whole. When young people experience homelessness, it disrupts their education, employment opportunities, and overall well-being, creating long-term social and economic consequences for them and the province. By preventing youth homelessness, we not only support the individuals affected but also strengthen social cohesion, reduce strain on public services, and foster a more equitable and resilient society (Gaetz, 2016). And simply put, addressing systemic causes helps to prevent other causes of homelessness. Schools are uniquely positioned to play a critical role in preventing youth homelessness. However, without intentional policy and pedagogy shifts as well as structural investments, they will remain underutilized in the fight against youth precarity. This thesis argues for a reimagining of the responsibilities of schools, not as isolated institutions, but as key actors in a broader, cross-sectoral effort to prevent homelessness before it begins. By leveraging school-based prevention strategies, and better funding schools to tackle these issues and implement efficient primary and secondary prevention practices for the success of all Quebecois youth, we can move towards a future where fewer young people experience homelessness, and all students have the opportunity to thrive.

A Comprehensive Review of the Relevant Literature

Youth homelessness is a critical social issue, necessitating concerted efforts from multiple sectors, including education. Schools can be pivotal in preventing youth homelessness by providing early intervention, support, and resources to at-risk students. In efforts to support youth homelessness prevention in schools, we can look to the understandings and perspectives of youth with lived experiences of homelessness to ground our development of effective primary prevention strategies, including addressing systemic inequities that are necessary to undertake primary prevention (Gaetz 2018;Gaetz 2016). This literature review explores the relevant academic and gray literature on the overall policy and practice shift toward understanding and implementing prevention practices both in and out of schools and how the education system can potentially play a part in this prevention. In this literature review and throughout my research I hope to focus on prevention efforts that address systemic and root causes since these are the ones that are least likely to be implemented and funded. This literature review aims to establish a baseline for addressing and remedying issues of youth homelessness within educational contexts, while also exploring the limited (Malenfant et al., 2024) available literature around lived experiences and the realities of youth homelessness. In addition, the review of recent scholarly works discussed will try to explore and explain the most effective strategies, challenges, and outcomes related to preventing youth homelessness in schools that currently exist. This includes an assessment of the evolution of school-based prevention programs and the growing focus on youth in Canadian homelessness research and advocacy. Finally, I address identifiable limitations within these systems and current prevention attempts, analyzing where further early intervention and policy development are needed to more effectively support youth experiencing homelessness.

Literature Search and Screening Search Strategy

The primary question driving this literature review is how to use existing findings and my interpretations of them to establish a foundational understanding for addressing and remedying youth homelessness within educational contexts. This approach aims to highlight effective practices while also identifying where the literature lacks insight or data, particularly around the lived experiences and nuanced realities of youth homelessness (Malenfant et al., 2024). I chose

this approach because it will allow me to identify and illuminate critical gaps in the existing research, particularly those related to how youth experience homelessness and navigate educational systems. These insights are essential to later stages of my work, specifically for a policy analysis that can more precisely address these gaps, ultimately contributing to the development of more inclusive and effective school-based prevention strategies. To collect the relevant literature, the following databases were searched: JSTOR, EBSCO, Scholars Portal and Google scholar. Keywords included "youth homelessness," "homelessness prevention," "systemic inequities" (in conjunction with one or both of the prior 2), "Quebec," "schools," and "lived experience of homelessness." In addition, studies must have been published within the last 20 years to have been considered. Lastly, the majority of the readings must have been peer-reviewed articles or books, either in English or French publications. Inclusion criteria for studies searched focusing on youth homelessness, articles discussing prevention strategies in schools, research on systemic inequities related to youth homelessness, qualitative studies involving youth with lived experience. Research focusing solely on adult homelessness was excluded.

Data Extraction and Organization

My lived experience as a young person navigating educational disengagement and housing precarity, and my professional experience as an educator across diverse classroom settings have led me to focus specifically on literature that highlights the shift toward prevention in Canadian/Quebecois homelessness spheres, evaluations and descriptions of school-based prevention programs, and relevant articles outlining these efforts. To clarify what is meant by "youth" in this context: for this work, which focuses on youth served by homelessness organizations or schools, definitions of youth can extend into the early thirties. Additionally, a pan-Canadian survey done by the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness (Gaetz, 2016) “Without a Home” uses a definition of youth homelessness that includes individuals up to the age of 24, acknowledging the unique needs and circumstances of this group. Extending this upper limit recognizes the prolonged period of instability and transition that can contribute to housing insecurity. In other contexts (Gaetz and Dej ,2017), youth may be conceived as a period lasting to 16-24 years of age. My decision to define “young” starting at 14 in this study is due to

this developmental stage (Gaetz and Dej ,2017), spanning from teens through the later twenties, suggesting a distinct period that is neither adolescence nor full-fledged adulthood, marked by significant growth and change which illustrates the complexity and variability of the transition to adulthood, supporting an increasingly adopted view that I adhere to, that individuals aged 14-30 can reasonably be considered "young", particularly in contexts requiring targeted support and understanding of their unique developmental and societal positioning.

"Youth" can thus be interpreted in various ways (Gaetz, 2016;Gaetz and Dej ,2017; Fielding and Forchuk, 2013; Smith, 2013), encompassing a developmental phase (Gaetz and Dej, 2017), a social construct (Dolson, 2024), a demographic category (Smith, 2013), and even a fluid concept that shifts based on context and experience (Fielding and Forchuk, 2013), all of which reinforce the flexibility and diversity in defining youth. In the context of youth and homelessness or precarity, I define a young person as someone aged 14 to 30 who has either previous or current experiences of homelessness and/or precarity. This definition reflects my understanding based on the literature reviewed and the insights gained throughout this study. This further contextualized definition of youth allows for a better understanding of youth and homelessness as we move forward.This broad categorization aligns with scholarly literature (Gaetz, 2016;Gaetz and Dej ,2017; Fielding and Forchuk, 2013; Smith, 2013), which views youth as a fluid and in a developmental phase shaped by many social, economic, and individual factors. Therefore, this work will avoid a "universal" approach, recognizing that definitions of youth and experiences of homelessness are diverse and complex. Attempting to impose a single, rigid definition could overlook critical nuances and diverse experiences, limiting the depth and inclusivity of this study; instead, I engage the literature on youth broadly, and use the category as a fluid one that centers youth-led definitions of this period.

Introduction to Youth Homelessness and Its Causes

The Causes of Youth Homelessness

The causes of youth homelessness can generally be categorized into three main groups. To illustrate this more clearly, I've created a visual pie chart below, titled "The Causes of Youth Homelessness (Fig. 3)" highlighting these categories: 1) Systemic causes, 2) Structural causes, and 3) Individual/Relational causes. At times, youth homelessness may be attributed to a single

cause, while in other instances, it results from a combination of multiple factors, as the issue is often complex and not a single simple one thing to point to. The chart does not reflect the actual percentages of systemic, structural, and individual/relational causes based on their prevalence. Instead, it serves a visual purpose, highlighting the three equally important aspects of the issue. This visualization aims to clarify that addressing all three areas is crucial for effectively preventing youth homelessness.

(Fig. 3)

First, we can see above, the systemic causes of youth homelessness as discussed by Blackstock (2012), Charbonneau & Boucher, (2020), Edwards (2020), Gaetz et al. (2018) and Malenfant, Schwan, French, Gaetz, Redman (2020). These arise from the policy failures or gaps in public systems, such as the education system, child welfare, and criminal justice systems. Current Quebec policies inadequately address the needs of youth transitioning out of the Child and Youth Protection Center (DPJ) and fail to provide ongoing support to those aging out of the child welfare system, leaving many vulnerable to homelessness. Similarly, policies that do not account for the unique challenges faced by students experiencing significant life disruptions, such as frequent moves due to foster care placements or expulsions from school, further contribute to the risk of homelessness. Additionally, an instance where a young person may drop out of school due to untreated mental health issues, compounded by a lack of access to school

counselors or affordable healthcare, emerges from multiple strands of literature that examine the intersection of youth homelessness, mental health, and educational outcomes (Gaetz et al., 2016). Systemic barriers (Sample & Ferguson, 2011;Shelton, 2015) address the underlying systems of inequality or discrimination within institutions or policies. These are often ingrained in societal norms and the operations of systems themselves, such as racism (Jones, 2016), ableism, or homophobia (Shelton, 2015) embedded in the housing or welfare systems. Systemic barriers can be more subtle than structural ones but are equally impactful. For instance, LGBTQ2S+ youth may face discrimination within the shelter system (Abramovich, 2017;Damian, 2023;Jones, 2016), or Indigenous youth might be disproportionately affected by policies due to systemic racism (Ansloos, 2022; Blackstock, 2012; Government of Canada, 2024; Picard, 2018). These barriers can include discriminatory laws or policies, inadequate funding for social services, and bureaucratic hurdles that disproportionately affect marginalized populations or even feelings of "un-home" (Manson, 2024). This is not to suggest that this is the only way youth experience harm. Young people face everyday harm, violence, and racism, often within school environments, and these experiences contribute to their increased risk of homelessness; Young people also face individual harm, violence and racism, and these individual, systemic and structural harms exist within school environments and contribute to increased risk of homelessness (Biggar, 2001; Golosky, 2021; Kidd, 2011; Mallett et al., 2004; Stewart, 2022).

Second, youth homelessness may be related to structural causes (Ansloos, Wager & Dunn, 2022; Baskin, 2007; Krüsi, Fast,Small, Wood & Kerr, 2010). These causes are rooted in societal inequities, these causes reflect structural discrimination, poverty, and inadequate access to resources like affordable housing and social supports. Bureaucratic barriers exacerbate these inequalities. For example the long waitlists for public housing disproportionately affect marginalized youth, including those from low-income and racialized communities, reducing their stability and ability to focus on education (Gaetz et al., 2017).

Lastly, we have the individual/relational causes (Bertrand et al., 2021; Fleury et al., 2010); Komaroff et al., 2011). These include personal or family challenges such as: mental health issues, substance abuse, or family violence. These causes often stem from or are exacerbated by systemic and structural issues. Taken together, these 3 categories, systemic, structural, and individual/relational, offer a more comprehensive understanding of youth homelessness by demonstrating that youth homelessness is not the result of personal failings but

rather a product of intersecting failures at multiple levels of society. This understanding is essential for designing effective prevention strategies that move beyond emergency responses and instead target the root causes of homelessness. By examining these causes collectively, we can push for policy changes that acknowledge the role of public institutions, like schools, to reduce systemic inequities, and ensure that youth are not left to navigate precarity alone.

Youth and Youth Homelessness

Homelessness is not the same as it used to be (Dolson, 2024). Since the early 80s, homelessness in Canada was primarily focused on senior men without partners (Gaetz et al., 2016). Before this, there were still youth, families and women experiencing homelessness, but it was largely invisible and few mainstream services cared for them. Before the 1980s, homelessness was often viewed differently than it is today. The transition in the 1980s marked a significant shift in the understanding and management of homelessness, largely influenced by neoliberal and capitalist ideologies (Dolson, 2024). This period saw a reduction in social welfare programs which emphasized personal responsibility over collective support (Gaetz, S., & Canadian Homelessness Research Network, 2013). As a result, both the organization of schools and homelessness management became intertwined with these neoliberal values (Dolson, 2024), focusing on efficiency and accountability rather than addressing the root causes of homelessness. This shift led to a more fragmented approach to both education and social services, often neglecting the complexities of homelessness and the systemic factors that contribute to it. Understanding this transition helps illuminate the broader socio-economic context in which both youth homelessness and educational challenges are situated today. Not only are more young people experiencing homelessness, but the frequency (that young people will experience homelessness more often in their lives) of youth homelessness is also on the rise (Gaetz et al., 2016). So what are the root causes of youth homelessness?

In the context of youth homelessness, "macro" and "micro" levels often provide distinct but interconnected perspectives for analyzing causes, experiences, and interventions (Mayock, 2011); Noor, 2021). The macro level (Noor, 2021) refers to the larger, systemic influences on youth homelessness, including societal structures, policies, economic forces, and institutional practices (Mayock, 2011). These factors can include national policies on housing, education,

employment, and welfare, as well as broader societal issues such as economic inequality, racism, and the impacts of neoliberalism. On this level, youth homelessness can be seen as a consequence of structural and systemic inequalities that limit opportunities and stability for marginalized youth populations. While the micro level (Mayock, 2011), on the other hand, focuses on the individual and interpersonal aspects of youth homelessness, including personal experiences, family dynamics, and peer relationships. It involves the day-to-day realities of young people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness and includes factors like family breakdown, trauma, mental health challenges, and limited social support (Noor, 2021).

In the "Coming of Age: Reimagining the Response to Youth Homelessness in Canada"(2014), Gaetz argues that structural barriers can be the external, visible systems and structures that limit access to essential resources, services or opportunities. These include the housing market, education systems, healthcare access, and laws or policies that create obstacles, such as the shortage of affordable housing or insufficient funding for social services. Structural barriers (Edwards, 2022; Krüsi et al., 2010; Malenfant, 2022; Shelton, 2015) are tangible, institutionalized roadblocks that, on a macro level (Mayock, 2011; Noor, 2021), impede youth from escaping homelessness. An example would be the lack of affordable housing stock (Blackstock, 2012) that disproportionately affects low-income families (Jones, 2016; Picard, 2018) and youth transitioning out of foster care (Fast et al, 2014; Fast et al., 2019; Nichols, 2023; Nichols, 2008). An important example of a structural barrier in schools is outlined in the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 2015 report* (Government of Canada, 2024), which spotlighted how historical injustices and structural barriers continue to impact Indigenous youth, contributing to higher rates of homelessness within this demographic. A more recent event, the COVID-19 pandemic *(Farnish, 2022,* Gewirtz O'Brien, et al., 2021; Kang, 2021; Perri & Sohn, 2022) also revealed and exacerbated existing structural barriers (Damian, 2023). It can be easy to imagine that marginalized youth were more vulnerable during lockdowns, as shelters and support services became less accessible, highlighting the necessity for better structural responses, social safety nets and emergency housing solutions (Gewirtz O'Brien, et al., 2021; Perri & Sohn, 2022).

The distinction between structural barriers and systemic barriers is essential when exploring youth homelessness prevention literature, as the two terms, while related, do not always intersect and can sometimes wrongly be used interchangeably, leading to confusion.

Policies are often considered structural because they are part of the formal frameworks, laws, and guidelines established by institutions, governments, and organizations to shape systems and structures. Structural policies set the rules and resources that influence individuals' lives and broader social dynamics. However, policies can also reinforce or perpetuate systemic issues such as racism or bias; when the structures they create or sustain lead to unequal outcomes across society. This demonstrates the interconnected but distinct nature of forces shaping youth homelessness. It's critical to clarify that these concepts address different dimensions of the obstacles faced by homeless youth. While both concepts deal with barriers to accessing essential services, structural barriers focus more on tangible, material obstacles (e.g., lack of resources), whereas systemic barriers refer to the ingrained societal and institutional prejudices that perpetuate inequalities (Gaetz and Dej, 2017). 2SLGBTQ+ and or Indigenous youth who are in situations of homelessness have experiences which may be shaped by distinct root causes, such as discrimination, systemic racism, family rejection, and the lasting impacts of colonialism (Abramovich, 2017; Ansloos, 2022; Blackstock, 2012; Damian, 2023). These concepts do not always speak to each other, as one might be addressed without adequately addressing the other. For instance, improving housing availability (addressing a structural barrier) does not inherently eliminate systemic racism that might still affect which youth can access housing or benefit from these resources. Recognizing that structural and systemic barriers operate in parallel but are not synonymous highlights the need for a dual focus in my project, ensuring both areas are addressed comprehensively and how broader societal factors contribute to individual issues (Dej et al., 2022).

To better understand the intersections of structural, individual and systemic factors, looking at the significant impact of the child welfare system on youth homelessness provides a helpful example in the literature. The child welfare system is a significant root cause of youth homelessness and precarity. This system often fails to help children address the issues underlying their initial removal from home, leading to unaddressed trauma (Serge, 2002). Additionally, youth in care frequently face heightened trauma throughout their time in the system (Serge, 2002). When youth leave care at a predetermined age, this often does not align with their developmental readiness to exit, resulting in poor outcomes (Serge, 2002). Baskin's research with Indigenous youth highlights that many youth leave home prematurely, leading to underdeveloped life skills and challenges later within the welfare system (Baskin, 2007; Doucet,

2020; Picard, 2018; Nichols, 2024). Alarmingly, studies show that 25-50% of all homeless youth come directly from child welfare (Lindsey, 2000). In short, the child welfare system may not be adequately protecting vulnerable children and youth (Embleton, 2016), highlighting the need for further policies or procedures to address the long-lasting consequences this system has on already vulnerable youth.

Frameworks and Background

Typologies and Definitions of Prevention and Intervention

Fitzpatrick, Mackie, Wood and Morris Prevention Framework.

The Fitzpatrick, Mackie, Wood and Morris framework (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021; Mackie, Fitzpatrick, & Morris, 2024) advances a structured, five-stage approach to understanding homelessness prevention (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021), which includes upstream (the type of prevention this research is trying to advance), crisis, emergency, repeat, and universal prevention categories. This typology (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021) is intended to clarify distinctions between types of interventions and identify which strategies may have the most impact, allowing for a more coherent approach to prevention efforts. First and most important for my research, upstream prevention (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021) which targets systemic issues that contribute to homelessness, such as poverty reduction, affordable housing access, and early interventions in education and employment. This stage seeks to reduce the likelihood of homelessness by addressing root causes that affect vulnerable populations before they enter a crisis. Second is crisis prevention meaning how one intervenes when individuals are at imminent risk of homelessness due to events like job loss, domestic issues, or eviction (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021). By providing help with immediate support such as legal aid or temporary financial assistance, crisis prevention helps prevent people from losing their housing (Mackie, Fitzpatrick, & Morris, 2024). Third, is emergency prevention which is implemented when a housing crisis is unavoidable (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021), offering emergency shelter or temporary accommodation to avoid rough sleeping similarly to some of the places at volunteered at. This stage often reflects traditional homeless service responses, providing a safety net to those who have already lost housing (Mackie, Fitzpatrick, & Morris, 2024). Fourth is a repeat prevention focusing this time to reduce recurring

homelessness (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021), more often than not by offering long-term support or case management for individuals who cycle in and out of homelessness (which is not uncommon). The authors (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021;Mackie, Fitzpatrick, & Morris, 2024) in consequence demands tailored support plans and housing stabilization programs. The fifth and final universal prevention intervention encompasses broad-based strategies that improve social conditions (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021;Mackie, Fitzpatrick, & Morris, 2024). An example of this can be anything from educational policies that enhance job stability later in life to more sometimes political social housing investments. Although it overlaps with upstream prevention, universal prevention serves all individuals rather than targeting specific at-risk groups.

Gaetz and Dej Typology for Prevention.

Stephen Gaetz and Dej's typology framework for homelessness prevention (2022) offers a comprehensive structure for understanding what "prevention" is in the context of youth homelessness. Prevention here is focused on addressing the root causes that lead to homelessness and aims to intervene before young people experience it (Gaetz, 2018). Gaetz (2018) categorizes prevention into five main areas (Schwan et al., 2018; Dej, 2017) each aimed at reducing homelessness risk by targeting specific factors or points of intervention in a youth's life. Under the framework proposed by Dej & Gaetz (2022) there exists 3 phases of categories of prevention: primary/secondary/tertiary all of which spread across structural, systemic, early intervention, eviction prevention and housing stabilization. The first category is structural prevention which targets systemic issues like poverty, housing inaccessibility, and social exclusion that put youth at risk of homelessness (Gaetz, Schwan & Redman, 2018; MacDonald, & Roebuck, 2018). It involves large-scale policy changes (Schwan et al., 2018) aimed at creating safer, more equitable environments (e.g., economic security, social inclusion, and supportive housing policies). This first primary prevention (Dej & Gaetz, 2022) is the type before homelessness happens. This can look like affordable housing, having strong labor protections and wages and laws to avoid people from getting fired, amongst others. Second category involves systems prevention, which addresses failures within institutional systems, such as child welfare, education, or healthcare, which often lack adequate transition support (Gaetz, Schwan & Redman, 2018). This category focuses on making systems more responsive to at-risk youth, reducing the likelihood of youth becoming homeless after leaving institutions (e.g., foster care, correctional facilities). Secondary

prevention (Dej & Gaetz 2022) is aimed at helping high at risk individuals, and includes early intervention. The research present in this thesis will be speaking to this type of prevention primarily. The third category is early intervention which provides support to young people and families before homelessness occurs (Gaetz, Schwan & Redman, 2018). This can include family and community support systems or school-based initiatives, all intended to stabilize situations that could lead to homelessness. Tertiary prevention (Dej & Gaetz, 2022) is the type of prevention that happens closer to crisis response, an example of this can look like paying a landlord to keep someone from being evicted in their home. These people have not been homeless, thus slightly different than working with people who are actively homeless. The fourth and fifth of Gaetz's (2018) typology is that of eviction prevention and housing stabilization (Gaetz and Dej, 2017, p. 44) which both aim to help youth remain in their current housing or quickly regain stable housing if they are at risk of eviction. This includes legal supports, emergency funds, and mediation services to ensure housing security (Schwan et al., 2018).

These prevention strategies collectively encourage interventions that are "upstream" or "primary" in nature (Gaetz and Dej, 2017), focusing on mitigating risk factors before homelessness becomes an immediate threat. My research on primary and secondary prevention will align well with this framework, particularly with the exploration of early intervention and systemic reform in schools to reduce risks for vulnerable youth by addressing underlying issues within the educational and social support systems (Gaetz, Schwan & Redman 2018; Gaetz, 2018; Gaetz and Dej, 2017; Schwan et al., 2018).

Both the Gaetz and Fitzpatrick & Mackie frameworks underscore the essential role of targeted interventions at multiple levels to effectively prevent youth homelessness. In this thesis, I will be using the definitions of Gaetz's early intervention (Gaetz and Dej, 2017) and Fitzpatrick & Mackie's upstream prevention (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021), with my particular emphasis on that of primary and secondary prevention approaches, to explore how education systems can better prevent precarity and youth homelessness.

Shift towards the Focus on Youth in Canadian Homelessness Research and Advocacy

When looking at the overall literature, in recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in Canadian homelessness research and advocacy, with a growing emphasis on youth (Gaetz, 2014;

Schwan et al., 2018). This shift is reflected in the evolving role of policy advocacy, as highlighted by Kaitlin Schwan and her colleagues in their work on networks and evidence-based advocacy (Nichols et al., 2020). Policy advocacy in the context of youth homelessness involves efforts to influence and shape legislation, programs, and services that directly address the needs of young people who are either homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The central aim is to push for systemic changes that focus not only on providing immediate relief but also on preventing homelessness before it begins (Dej & Gaetz, 2022; Hankivsky et al.,2014). Schwan and her collaborators (Schwan et al., 2018; Nichols, Malenfant, Schwan, 2020) highlight the multi-faceted nature of policy advocacy, which draws on the work of various stakeholders. These include researchers, advocacy organizations, non-profits, and individuals directly impacted by homelessness. This work underscores the importance of grounding advocacy in data, which helps frame the need for change and directs efforts towards long-term solutions. Recent developments in policy and advocacy reflect the complexity and successes of these efforts (MacKenzie, 2018; Malenfant, & Schwan, 2020). There is an increasing awareness of youth homelessness as a significant social issue contributing to this growing recognition (Belcher, 2012; Gaetz & Dej,2017). Legislative actions, such as the reauthorization of the McKinney-Vento Act in the United States, demonstrate the concrete outcomes of sustained advocacy. Meanwhile, funding priorities have shifted (Cunningham, 2013; Miller, 2011), with a greater focus on proactive approaches that prevent youth from becoming homeless, rather than relying solely on reactive emergency services.

In short, the shift in policy advocacy towards youth homelessness represents a broader change in how homelessness is understood and addressed in Canada. Where previous efforts may have focused more on short-term relief, there is now a growing emphasis on preventive measures and early intervention. Researchers like Kaitlin Schwan (2020) have played a pivotal role in this transformation, using data-driven advocacy to push for policies that not only respond to youth homelessness but actively work to prevent it. Collaborative efforts between researchers, advocates, and policymakers are creating a more effective, comprehensive approach to tackling youth homelessness, with a focus on both immediate support and long-term systemic change.

The Difference Between Early Detection and Intervention Programming

In examining the shift towards school-based prevention programming for youth homelessness, early detection and intervention play a crucial role. Kish and Rosa (2018) provide insight into how "Early Detection and Intervention Programming" identifies individuals at risk of homelessness and provides targeted support before their situations escalate. This proactive strategy is essential in addressing homelessness by intervening early and preventing crises from developing. Kish and Rosa's (2018) research emphasizes the mechanisms for identifying at-risk youth, focusing on factors such as family instability, financial struggles, or academic problems. Once identified, intervention programs offer services like counseling, financial aid, or social support, mitigating these risk factors before they lead to homelessness. These mechanisms include regular monitoring and reporting (in public systems by staff) on things like well-being or even performance), interdisciplinary teams (similar to the COSS, these are teams established with the help of not only educators but counsellors and social workers to collaborate on addressing the needs of at-risk youth) and early intervention programs (such as procedures in place to support students showing clear distress). Their findings demonstrate that, while early detection and intervention deal with individuals already showing signs of risk, they serve a preventive function by halting the progression into homelessness.

This approach aligns with the broader goal of preventing youth homelessness (Gaetz and Dej, 2017; Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021), complementing other systemic efforts and housing stability programs. Over recent years, the development of risk assessment tools and increased focus on preventive strategies have contributed to the success of these interventions. Research, like Kish and Rosa's, underscores the effectiveness of these programs, advocating for their integration into wider prevention frameworks.

Educational Policy and School-Based Prevention

The Role of Schools in Preventing Homelessness

Emerging research in Quebec suggests that schools might be framed as critical sites for prevention (Bélanger, 2021; Côté, 2019; Desrochers, 2019). Research by Desrochers (2019) highlights the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration between educators, social workers, and healthcare providers. This collaboration ensures that schools are equipped to address complex needs related to socioeconomic instability. Moreover, school programs that integrate

social-emotional learning and trauma-informed practices, such as those piloted in marginalized neighborhoods of Montreal, have shown promise in reducing risk factors for homelessness (Côté, 2019). Malenfant, & Nichols (2025; 2022) emphasize that school policy and practices in Quebec, and broadly, often assume that students are not homeless, which limits schools' capacity to recognize the lived experiences of vulnerable youth. Furthermore, schools can conceptualize their role in preventing broader systemic issues, such as housing instability, that impact students' ability to learn. This proactive approach would focus on identifying students facing precarity and engaging them with support systems before crisis develop.

Consequences of Inaction in Schools

Failure to address youth homelessness within schools can exacerbate systemic inequities. Charbonneau and Boucher (2020) note that youth experiencing housing precarity in Quebec are disproportionately likely to disengage from education, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization. The absence of targeted prevention measures in schools leaves at-risk students reliant on external systems that may be difficult to access. Without adequate homelessness prevention measures, students may experience academic failure, social isolation, and mental health challenges. These outcomes can lead to higher dropout rates and, ultimately, to long-term homelessness, substance abuse, or criminal justice involvement (Edwards, 2020). The social and systemic conditions contributing to homelessness must be recognized in schools' responses, which should not be isolated from other external factors that exacerbate youth homelessness. Pazarelli (2021) highlights how the actions of police officers and social conditions in the wake of interactions with policy increase homelessness rates in Quebec.

Existing Prevention Models in Quebec

Pilot programs in Montreal and Quebec City schools have successfully implemented community-driven approaches to early intervention. For example, the "Projet Réussite Jeunesse," developed by local school boards, Centraide in Quebec and supported by the Fondation Lucie et André Chagnon, in collaboration with community organizations, focuses on reducing barriers to education for students facing homelessness and at promoting school perseverance among vulnerable youth (Bélanger et al., 2021). Despite its positive intentions, the “Projet Réussite

Jeunesse" faces notable challenges. Firstly, like that of many homelessness prevention programs there is insufficient funding and human resources to meet the growing needs of youth, especially exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Many students, particularly those already vulnerable, struggled with the pandemic's disruptions, such as school closures and isolation, which impacted their learning and mental health (Pinard, 2022; Roque, 2022).

The time I spent helping out at organizations which serve the homeless and precarious youth in Quebec has only opened my eyes to the same problems these programs and the data share of High Dropout Rates. Programs like "Projet Réussite Jeunesse" target regions with elevated dropout rates, sometimes nearing 40% in disadvantaged areas. These persistent challenges indicate systemic issues that cannot be fully addressed through this initiative alone (Pinard, 2022; Roque, 2022). Lastly, while the program provides immediate relief and support, its long-term effectiveness in reducing dropout rates and fostering sustained academic success requires further evaluation and potentially broader systemic interventions (Roque, 2022). These programs leverage localized data to create tailored interventions, demonstrating the potential for scalable solutions across the province but definitely still need to be supported by Quebec's policy.

It is crucial to recognize that school-based homelessness prevention strategies cannot function in isolation from broader social policies and systemic issues. Malenfant (2022) notes that the consequences of neglecting homelessness prevention in schools will not only affect educational outcomes but will also contribute to increased homelessness, which impacts various social sectors. These programs leverage localized data to create tailored interventions, demonstrating the potential for scalable solutions across the province but definitely still need to be worked on and supported by Quebecs policy. Without adequate support, youth may experience increased academic failure, social isolation, and mental health issues, which can perpetuate cycles of homelessness (Cunningham et al., 2010; Murphy & Tobin, 2012). The lack of intervention can lead to a higher likelihood of dropping out of school, which further exacerbates the risk of long-term homelessness and associated negative outcomes, such as involvement in the criminal justice system or substance abuse (Edwards, 2020).

Educational Prevention Approaches

Shift to Prevention

Prevention approaches aim to consider systemic and structural inequities, while also trying to know what those are, and how upstream (Sohn, 2019) or primary prevention can address them. In the literature, prevention (Gaetz and Dej, 2017; Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021) has been associated, conceptualized and implemented as needing to focus on addressing inequities caused by systemic and structural factors as well as that of individual shortcomings. An example of research that has progressed this argument is that of the Geelong Project which has shifted many new approaches from crisis to prevention (MacKenzie, 2014). The *Geelong Project* emerged from an initial pilot project called the Geelong Study as a groundbreaking early intervention initiative aimed at preventing youth homelessness in Australia. It is centered in the city of Geelong and focuses on identifying young people at risk of homelessness or school disengagement and intervening early through tailored support services. This project is based on the *Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model (*MacKenzie, 2014), which integrates education, welfare services, and community engagement. The goal is to identify risk factors before crises occur, such as family breakdown or school dropout, by using a universal screening tool called the *Population Screening Tool*.

The Geelong Project has led to major shifts in how homelessness prevention is approached, particularly in how early interventions are designed. One significant event was the international adopted of the COSS model into Australia, Canada, America and UK through Upstream (MacKenzie, 2024;Mackenzie, & Thielking, 2013; Mackenzie & Thielking, 2014; Sohn, 2019), inspired by the successes of the Geelong Study. This national initiative, introduced in the 2010s, applies the lessons from Geelong to schools across Australia, broadening the scope of early intervention for at-risk youth.

Mackenzie, leading developer of the Geelong Study (Sohn, 2019), first published findings emphasizing the model's unique approach to homelessness prevention by integrating educational institutions into the early identification of at-risk youth (Mackenzie, 2013; 2017). Early findings were disseminated through reports and journal articles in the late 2000s and early 2010s, prior to the widespread, international adoption of the *Upstream Project* (Sohn, 2020). Mackenzie's publications in journals like *Parity* (MacKenzie, 2024; MacKenzie, 2018) and research reports produced for welfare and governmental bodies (MacKenzie, 2018) provided

critical data and advocacy for systemic change in youth homelessness prevention, focusing on community collaboration and education-based interventions. Mackenzie's work gives clear findings from some of the Geelong work, including that there was about 50% reduction in youth using shelters. These findings (MacKenzie, 2024; MacKenzie, 2018;Sohn, 2019;Sohn, 2020) highlighted the "Upstream" approach as a key conceptual shift from reactive homelessness services (addressing crises after they occur) to proactive, preventive measures aimed at keeping youth connected to school and family.

Shift to School-Based Prevention Programming

School-based interventions aim to prevent youth homelessness by integrating supportive services, such as counseling, academic assistance, and social services, tailored to meet the needs of at-risk youth (Hallett and Skrla, 2017). These programs assess the effectiveness of prevention efforts by embedding them in the educational and social systems surrounding young people (Manfra, 2019). What stands out in this approach is the focus on addressing risk factors (such as family instability, mental health challenges, or academic difficulties; within the school environment (Gaetz, 2014)). By providing timely academic or counseling support, schools can identify and address risks before they lead to homelessness, thus playing a pivotal role in early intervention. The growing awareness of student homelessness as a critical issue in education has led to an increased focus on effective school-based prevention. Studies like those by Hallett & Skrla (2017), Kish and Rosa (2018), Gaetz (2014) Vitopoulos (2018), Nichols (2016a) and Gaetz et al. (2016; 2018; 2019) underscore the importance of resources, collaboration, and strategic intervention in addressing the complex needs of homeless students.

In reviewing literature on school-based prevention programs and their role in reducing youth homelessness, there is substantial evidence supporting their success. Similar to approaches in fields such as law and medicine, the focus of these programs is on early recognition and intervention before problems escalate (Gaetz, 2014). Despite growing evidence of their effectiveness, school-based homelessness prevention programs (Canfield, 2015; Moore, 2020; Sohn, 2019) remain relatively scarce, facing significant barriers to implementation and scaling. These challenges include limited resources and institutional resistance to new initiatives (Canfield, 2015; Moore, 2020; Sohn, 2019).

Programs like those discussed by Hallett and Skrla (2017) in *Supporting Students Who Are Homeles*s underscore the effectiveness of school-based interventions in addressing and preventing youth homelessness. Their guide emphasizes several key components essential for success. First, school-based prevention involves strategies tailored to the specific needs of homeless students, directly addressing challenges they face in accessing education. These interventions are crucial for ensuring educational equity, as they help guarantee that homeless students have the same opportunities and resources as their housed peers. Additionally, the guide provides practical resources for educators and administrators, offering a comprehensive framework for supporting homeless students. Finally, it highlights the importance of student support systems, including counseling, academic assistance, and social services, all of which play a vital role in helping students who are homeless navigate their educational journeys while addressing broader social and emotional needs.

When examining the literature, we can further see that Gaetz & colleagues (2018; 2019) as well as the work of Vitopoulos (2018) point to the importance of trauma-informed (Maynard, 2019) practice for workers within schools when undertaking prevention responses. Key principles of trauma-informed approaches include prioritizing safety, promoting emotional regulation, and building strong, supportive relationships that help students feel secure and valued (Maynard, 2019). Schools implementing trauma-informed practices often provide additional training for staff on the signs and effects of trauma and use techniques to prevent re-traumatization (Maynard, 2019). Further, Hallet & Skrla's (2017) paper asks for more youth homelessness prevention into educational policy. Lastly, Nichols (2016a) cross-sectoral collaboration research says that schools need partnerships in order to succeed and help youth. Schools and community agencies working together more often than not can lead to better and newer innovative strategies and solutions that youth need (Nichols, 2016a) including school supplies or housing help. This shift to school-based prevention programming not only supports these students but also helps prevent future homelessness by addressing underlying risk factors early.

Challenges Homeless Youth Face in Schooling

Growing up can be challenging for any young person, but homeless youth face additional, specific difficulties, particularly in educational settings. These challenges include barriers to academic success and social integration (Cutuli, 2023). Homelessness significantly impacts educational outcomes, often leading to long-term negative effects (Mallett, 2009). In *Moving Out, Moving On: Young People's Pathways In and Through Homelessness* (Mallett, 2009), one youth shares that "homeless young people are typically portrayed as leading chaotic, risky lives, trapped in a downward spiral of drug use…". Beyond these stereotypes, the reality is even harsher—lacking access to proper food, a safe place to shower, sleep, or even use the bathroom, all while dealing with instability in their home and school environments, further undermines their academic performance (Manfra, 2019; Nichols, 2016b). These disruptions during formative years can result in poorer academic scores and lower achievements (Cutuli,2023; Rafferty, 2004), which follow them into adulthood, diminishing future opportunities and success to get a good enough job and or stay out of homelessness (Cutuli, 2023; Rafferty, 2004). Additionally, many adults, including teachers, may not fully understand the realities young people face unless open, honest conversations are encouraged with youth (Thielking, 2006). Stigma from either adults or even fellow peers as well as underreporting often leads to many youth in schools falling through the cracks (Cutuli, 2023). In a study with secondary school teachers and homeless youth, findings showed that stigmas attached to homeless youth led adults to wrongfully make assumptions about their students and showed that we need to communicate more with our youth (Thielking, 2017).

Oftentimes, the recurrent nature of homelessness leads to frequent school changes, disrupting education and making it difficult for students to form stable relationships with peers and staff (Thielking, 2018). This instability isn't just the instability that causes dropouts and disengagement (though it certainly does), it's instability stemming from a system that isn't built to serve these youth, and provides barriers to them ever succeeding which ultimately can result in academic disengagement and increased dropout rates (Nichols, 2016b; Sohn, 2020). The frequent movement of homeless youth between different shelters or living situations disrupts their education and hinders the development of stable, supportive relationships with school staff and peers (Miller, 2011).

The McKinney-Vento Act (Ausikaitis, 2015; Cunningham, 2013; Mantilla, 2024; Miller, 2011; Parrott, 2022), a pivotal U.S. federal law first enacted in 1987 and reauthorized several

times since then, is specifically designed to meet the needs of homeless individuals, particularly children and youth. This legislation aims to address the educational barriers faced by homeless students by ensuring their access to a free, appropriate public education, thus safeguarding their right to educational stability despite their circumstances. Among its key provisions, the Act mandates that school districts designate a liaison to assist homeless students and their families, thereby facilitating access to essential services and support (Ausikaitis et al., 2015). Furthermore, it guarantees transportation services to enable these students to attend their school of origin whenever feasible (Mantilla, 2024), thus promoting continuity in their education. The Act also asserts that homeless students have the same rights and opportunities as their housed peers, including enrollment in school, participation in extracurricular activities, and access to free school meals (Miller, 2011).

By framing its support around the reduction of barriers to education, the McKinney-Vento Act emphasizes the importance of stability and continuity in the educational journey of homeless students. This focus addresses the significant disruptions that homelessness can inflict on a child's learning experience. The initial enactment of the McKinney-Vento Act was a critical response to the escalating homelessness crisis in the United States, highlighting the urgent educational needs of this vulnerable population (Ausikaitis, 2015; Cunningham, 2013; Mantilla, 2024; Miller, 2011; Parrott, 2022).

Subsequent reauthorizations and amendments, including those introduced in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (Library of Congress Congressional Research Service, 2009) and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015) have further strengthened its provisions and broadened its impact, reinforcing the commitment to ensuring that homeless students receive equitable educational opportunities.

Lastly, recurrence of homelessness/ precarity and educational disruptions, such as inconsistent attendance, social isolation, and difficulties concentrating due to unstable living conditions, can have profound negative effects on youth who are frequently moving or in unstable situations (Moore, 2013). For instance, systemic poverty limits access to stable housing and quality education, placing youth in precarious circumstances that heighten their vulnerability to homelessness (Gaetz, 2014; Hallett, 2015). Similarly, discrimination and racism in housing, employment, and education create exclusionary barriers for racialized and marginalized youth, reducing their opportunities and resilience against homelessness risks (Abramovich, 2017;

Nichols et al., 2017). These disruptions can lead to unfair perceptions by teachers, the youth themselves, and potential employers that their academic performance is subpar. Thielking's 2018 study shows that student outcomes improve significantly when strong relationships are established between students and supportive adults like school psychologists, guidance officers, and counselors. As a busy teacher myself, I understand how challenging it can be to find time to build these crucial connections with students who are missing a lot of school, making it even harder to offer the support they need (Thielking, 2018).

In Canada, homeless youth populations include Indigenous youth (Gaetz et al., 2016), LGBTQ+ (Abramovich, 2017; Côté, Frésard & Blais, 2023), youth leaving child welfare like the DPJ in Quebec (Nichols et al., 2017), young people with mental health problems and or substance challenges like that of alcohol or drugs (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019), racialized youth of color (Schwan et al., 2018) and a smaller but still significant immigrant or refugee newcomers (Gaetz et al., 2016). Indigenous young people are significantly overrepresented in Canada's homeless population, often due to historical and ongoing systemic issues, such as the impacts of colonialism, displacement, and intergenerational trauma. Many Indigenous youth leave their communities to pursue education or escape unsafe conditions, only to encounter barriers that increase their risk of homelessness (Gaetz et 2016).

LGBTQ+ youth, especially those who face rejection from their families due to their sexual orientation or gender identity, are also highly overrepresented in homeless populations. They often experience discrimination and lack of acceptance, both within their families and broader society, leading to increased vulnerability (Abramovich, 2017). Youth who age out of the child welfare system frequently find themselves without adequate support as they transition into adulthood. Many lack stable housing, financial resources, or family support, increasing their risk of homelessness (Nichols et al., 2017). Mental health issues, coupled with limited access to adequate healthcare and support services, make this group more susceptible to homelessness. Substance use often intersects with mental health challenges, further complicating their situations and access to stable housing (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019). Systemic racism, socioeconomic disparities, and discrimination in housing and employment contribute to higher homelessness rates among racialized youth, who may face unique structural barriers based on race (Schwan et al., 2018).

Newly-arrived Canadians, including refugees and immigrants, face specific challenges such as language barriers, discrimination, and lack of social networks, which can place them at higher risk of homelessness. Some unaccompanied minors and youth without established support systems are especially vulnerable (Gaetz et al., 2016). Thus, by understanding the various types of youth at risk of homelessness or precarity (Gaetz et al., 2016), we can later better target where our prevention efforts should be focused on and what root causes we can try to change or make better in order to reduce and or prevent these instances with youth. As well as better understand who we are talking about when I am writing about youth (Schwan et al., 2018), and homelessness prevention.

Conclusion

This literature review has explored the complex nature of youth homelessness, emphasizing the critical role of schools in prevention efforts. By examining the systemic, structural, and individual/relational causes of youth homelessness, as outlined in "The Causes of Youth Homelessness (Fig. 3)," this review has highlighted how educational institutions are deeply embedded within these broader social dynamics and public systems. Systemic causes, such as poverty, discrimination, and inadequate social policies, intersect with structural barriers like housing instability and limited access to mental health services; meanwhile, individual and relational factors, including family conflict and trauma, directly impact students' educational experiences. Recognizing these interconnected causes is essential for schools aiming to move beyond reactive approaches and toward more proactive, supportive strategies.

Through the lens of Gaetz and Dej's Typology for Prevention (2022), this review has focused on the importance of primary and secondary prevention strategies within school contexts. This review has also underscored the profound challenges homeless youth face in educational settings. Stigma, trauma, inconsistent attendance, and unmet basic needs often leave these students underserved by schools that may lack the resources or frameworks to adequately support them. These barriers not only hinder academic achievement but can also perpetuate cycles of marginalization and exclusion.

Ultimately, this literature review has aimed to situate schools as pivotal spaces for youth homelessness prevention. By examining both the root causes and the systemic gaps within

educational responses, this review advocates for schools to become more proactive, trauma-informed, and focused on the needs of young people experiencing homelessness. Understanding the complex realities that different populations of youth face is essential for designing interventions that do more than address immediate crises; they must work toward dismantling the systemic and structural barriers that place young people at risk in the first place. Schools, when equipped with the right tools, pedagogy and partnerships, hold transformative potential in advancing both prevention and educational justice.

Theoretical Framework: Integrating Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970) as a Tool To Advance Youth Homelessness Prevention in Quebec

Paulo Freire's work offers a valuable lens through which to think about homelessness prevention. Freire himself experienced poverty and hunger as a child, later moving to a modest home without a ceiling in a system that punished and exploited millions of Brazilians. His experiences of concrete, survival-based hunger even led him to steal chickens out of necessity and shaped his understanding of oppression. These lived realities informed his lifelong commitment to education as a tool for liberation; one that does not merely integrate marginalized people into existing systems but actively transforms those systems to address the root causes of oppression. If homelessness prevention programs were to embrace this perspective more fully, positioning schools as not just sites of learning but places which can recognize youth as agents of systemic change, they could further empower young people and address the deeper inequalities that put them at risk in the first place. Quebec schools are uniquely positioned to address youth homelessness, where attendance is mandatory until the age of 16, and these spaces of education hold the power to either perpetuate oppression by reinforcing existing inequalities or serve as a powerful tool for emancipation, equipping young people with the critical awareness and support necessary to navigate and challenge the conditions that place them at risk.

To understand how schools can be leveraged as sites of meaningful prevention, this chapter engages with Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy (CP), as both a tool to advance youth homelessness prevention in Quebec and as a theoretical framing for this thesis, which emphasizes education as a means of liberation. Freire (1970) argues that education is never neutral. Education can either domesticate individuals into accepting unjust social structures or empower them to critically analyze and transform their realities. Freire's own lived experiences of poverty and marginalization informed his assertion that "the earlier dialogue begins, the more truly revolutionary will the movement be" (Freire, 1970, p. 128) underscores the importance of early intervention in education, making it particularly relevant to the discussion of youth homelessness prevention, which hopes to intervene before young people face the most impact of unjust social systems. This perspective is particularly relevant to youth homelessness prevention, which seeks to intervene before young people experience the most severe impacts of unjust social systems. By restructuring schools to prioritize critical engagement, students can develop

the tools necessary to navigate and challenge systemic barriers contributing to homelessness. A Freirean approach enables youth not only to survive but to take control of their circumstances, fostering a sense of agency that can lead to broader social change. Schools, therefore, must become proactive actors in early intervention, addressing root causes such as economic disparity, social stigma, and exclusionary educational policies. CP fosters environments where educators and students collaboratively challenge systemic injustices, positioning education as a vehicle for social change.

By situating schools within the broader social systems that contribute to youth homelessness, this chapter explores how systemic inequities manifest within educational institutions. These inequities create barriers to prevention, including inconsistent access to school-based support services, punitive disciplinary practices that disproportionately impact marginalized students, and a lack of trauma-informed approaches (Maynard, 2019). Using Freire's framework, I argue that these systemic failures not only increase young people's vulnerability to homelessness but also reflect a broader failure of the education system to serve as a protective factor for all youth. Further efforts to resolve homelessness through top-down policies risk reinforcing the very systems that perpetuate harm, rather than dismantling them. By applying a critical pedagogical lens, this chapter explores how schools, rather than passively reinforcing existing inequalities, can become active agents in youth homelessness prevention, fostering the conditions necessary for young people to resist and disrupt cycles of precarity.

What is Critical Pedagogy (CP), Praxis and Why Freire Viewed Education as a Pathway to Justice?

In this section, I will define Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy (CP), emphasizing its roots in critical theory and liberation. CP is presented as an emancipatory force by Freire (1970), empowering individuals to critically analyze and transform their sociopolitical realities. CP aims to foster environments where educators and students collaborate to challenge societal structures, enabling students to understand and address the systemic factors affecting their lives as Freire would put it, how youth exist both in the world and with the world. This pedagogical process helps youth navigate the systems they are embedded in by fostering a continuous cycle of critical awareness and action. Through this process, marginalized youth recognize their oppression,

develop a critical consciousness (or conscientização, a concept I explain further in the next paragraph), and engage in praxis, the process of combining reflection and action to challenge and transform the conditions that marginalize them. Freire (1970, p. 79) describes praxis as an ongoing cycle in which individuals critically analyze their realities and take informed action to transform them. Applied to youth homelessness prevention, praxis enables young people to confront systemic inequities both within and beyond schools. Within schools, this involves equipping students with the critical awareness and tools necessary to recognize and challenge systemic inequities that contribute to homelessness. This could take the form of a curriculum and teacher training that fosters critical thinking about social justice, or school policies that prioritize student well-being over punitive discipline. Outside of schools, praxis extends to community engagement, advocacy, and policy reforms that address the systemic factors placing youth at risk. By embracing praxis, both educators and students move beyond theoretical discussions, actively working toward dismantling the conditions that lead to homelessness, thereby embodying Freire's vision of education as a liberatory force. Rooted in lived experience, CP learning and action ensure it is both transformative and practical. Freire (1997a) emphasized that the most profound learning emerges from curiosity and lived experience, highlighting the need for educators to recognize and value students' diverse backgrounds. By doing so, they can create learning environments that challenge both symbolic and systemic discrimination, where symbolic discrimination reinforces dominant narratives that marginalize certain groups, and systemic discrimination embeds these biases into institutional structures (Freire, 1970). For example, non-Indigenous educational practices continue to fail Indigenous students across public school districts, underscoring the need for educators to critically address these systemic barriers while fostering spaces for shared knowledge and growth.

Freire’s belief in education as a pathway to justice stems from his concept of *conscientização* or critical consciousness, which enables individuals to comprehend and reshape their social reality. This occurs in two stages: first, becoming aware of the political and social conditions in which one lives (reflection), and second, actively working to change that reality (action). By embracing praxis, both educators and students move beyond theoretical discussions, actively working toward dismantling the conditions that lead to homelessness, thereby embodying Freire's vision of education as a liberatory force. Freire's concepts provide a powerful potential tool to engage youth who are at-risk of, or are navigating, homelessness to engage with,

critique, and navigate the systemic forces that have shaped their own education and housing precarity, thereby adding an element of praxis to preventative strategies.

Critical Pedagogy as a Tool for Decolonization and Systemic Transformation in Education

Freire emphasized that comprehension and meaning-making are intrinsically linked to lived experiences (Freire, 1987, p. 106). Critical Pedagogy (CP) facilitates this critical dialogue as a decolonizing practice by actively challenging and dismantling the colonial and capitalist structures deeply embedded in traditional education. Drawing on Darder (2017), I argue that CP resists the dominant banking model of education, which treats students as passive recipients of knowledge, instead advocating for an approach where students critically engage with their realities and question the power structures that shape them. Zembylas (2018) further expands on this by emphasizing the role of CP in unsettling deeply ingrained neoliberal and colonial logics within schooling, particularly through the cultivation of critical emotional praxis which encourage students and educators to engage with discomfort, resist systemic injustices, and foster solidarity in their learning environments. Freire further described neoliberal policies as the epitome of consumerism, creating greed, human misery and manufactured human wars, rewarding competition and shrinking of the middle class (1970). Capitalism exploits our learning processes by promoting flawed economic and political structures, dominating educational systems in Canada and similar contexts.

Freire criticized the traditional "banking model" of education, where teachers deposit information into passive “empty vessels” receiving students (Freire, 1970, p.72). This comes with the presumption that the student can then only understand and organize the knowledge given to them but can never be the creator of knowledge themselves (1970). Instead, Freire advocated for a dialogical approach that encourages active participation and critical reflection. This revolutionary dialogue, when practiced within classrooms and communities, becomes both a decision-making activity (fostering agency, transparency, and rigor) and a practice that can contribute to decolonization–an act to dismantle colonial systems of oppression–by empowering students to deconstruct and resist oppressive educational structures. While Freire does not explicitly frame this as a decolonizing approach, I draw on his work alongside others to argue that problem-posing education can serve as a tool for unsettling colonial legacies and advancing

emancipatory educational practices. Tuck and Yang (2012) critique how settler colonialism is often conflated with other forms of oppression in critical pedagogy, cautioning that without a direct focus on land, sovereignty, and Indigenous futures, education risks reproducing colonial frameworks rather than dismantling them. However, rather than viewing Freire's work as incompatible with decolonial practice, I argue that the problem-posing dialogue process can serve as both an approach and a praxis; one that fosters the critical consciousness necessary to confront colonial legacies while contributing to revolutionary/emancipatory education for youth. Battiste's (2013) critique of the"add and stir" approaches to educational reform aligns closely with this argument, highlighting that true transformation requires dismantling colonial structures rather than making surface-level modifications. By centering problem-posing education as a means of unsettling and disrupting dominant narratives and reclaiming agency, Freirean praxis can support decolonial educational movements that seek not only to critique, but to transform, the systems that shape youth experiences.

By connecting education to the personal and lived experiences of students, particularly those at risk of homelessness, teachers can foster a deeper engagement with learning and practice the approaches outlined by Freire. Activities like debating or journaling are examples of how problem-posing education can be effective in a classroom, enabling students to articulate and critically examine the systemic conditions influencing their lives. Recognizing youth as agents of change means also recognizing that it is the systems, not the youth themselves, that must change. Battiste (2013) reinforces this by arguing that without fundamentally restructuring education to address colonial foundations, reform efforts risk reproducing rather than dismantling systemic inequities.

A deeper understanding of the lived experiences of youth can lead to more meaningful insights into efforts to support them, (Tuck & Yang, 2012) such as youth homelessness prevention (Gaetz, & Redman, 2020; Malenfant, Schwan, French). Recognizing youth as agents of change means also recognizing that it is the systems, not the youth themselves, that must change. This means acknowledging that schools can be sites of harm for some students (Freire, 1970; Tuck & Yang, 2012). When enacted with an emancipatory intent, CP disrupts oppressive educational structures, creating spaces where marginalized youth can critically engage with their realities, reclaim their agency, and work toward structural transformation. Freirean beliefs (1970)

see all knowledge as subject to questioning with humility and openness, encouraging students to reflect on and critically engage with their educational experiences.

In capitalist societies, education often serves to reproduce existing power structures and economic systems, shaping social behavior and reinforcing inequalities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). This reproduces the dominant capitalist ideology and limits opportunities for social mobility, especially in areas such as youth homelessness prevention. Schools become sites where crisis responses, rather than proactive prevention strategies, are normalized, and meritocratic ideologies are perpetuated, further entrenching systems of inequality. Critiques of these systems align with Freire's (1970) argument that educational systems should be sites of liberation rather than oppression.

Scholarship critiquing the intersections of settler colonialism, neoliberalism, and capitalism in North American schools (Darder, 2017; Simpson, 2014; Zembylas, 2018) are useful for examining the systemic factors contributing to homelessness. However, within critical discussions on youth homelessness prevention, there is limited work exploring how systemic inequities, rooted in capitalist and colonial logics, position educational systems as spaces where homelessness is framed as an individual failure, and where disciplinary and paternalistic responses remain the norm. Drawing on Battiste (2013), I argue that failure to recognize and dismantle these colonial foundations reinforces the very structures that sustain youth precarity. A truly emancipatory educational model must challenge these dominant ideologies and create opportunities for social change and liberation.

Battiste further (2013) contends, education either reinforces colonial power structures or actively seeks to dismantle them, there is no neutrality. In the context of youth homelessness prevention in schools, this means that interventions must go beyond surface-level reforms and engage in a fundamental restructuring of educational institutions to address the colonial and capitalist frameworks that produce and sustain youth precarity. Programs like Upstream (Mackenzie, 2024; Sohn, 2019), for example, have demonstrated meaningful impact, but their success remains shaped by broader systemic constraints, ones that may presuppose that students fit into trajectories that fit within colonial education structures. Without integrating the critical pedagogical approaches of Freire and decolonial efforts of Battiste, education risks perpetuating, rather than disrupting, the structures that contribute to youth homelessness. By recognizing youth as central agents of systemic transformation, and by embedding their insights into both policy

and pedagogy, schools can shift from sites of reproduction of systemic inequity to sites of meaningful, emancipatory change.

Love as a Freirean Concept

Freire (1970) conceptualizes love not as a mere emotion, nor as a reference to lust or sex, but as a radical and necessary force in education, one inseparable from the pursuit of liberation and the ethical responsibility of teachers. It is a political commitment to solidarity, dialogue, and co-creating knowledge between educators and students. Love, in this sense, is an active force that requires educators to reject hierarchical, dehumanizing models of schooling, whether colonial or banking models, and instead cultivate learning spaces rooted in reciprocity and mutual transformation. Within a Freirean framework, education should not be imposed but rather developed through dialogue (Darder, 2017; Freire, 1997), where both teachers and students learn together, challenging oppressive structures that reproduce economic and political inequities.

By embedding this radical love into critical pedagogy, educators create classrooms that do more than transmit knowledge, they become spaces of collective learning and transformation. This approach allows both educators and students to not only challenge existing systems but also relearn and embody alternative economic and political practices that prioritize justice, care, and communal well-being over competition and exploitation. It directly confronts the capitalist and neoliberal banking model of education prevalent in Quebec and beyond, positioning schools as sites of decolonization and liberation. In doing so, it also opens possibilities for education to serve as a proactive mechanism for youth homelessness prevention, addressing the structural inequities that place young people at risk before they experience crisis.

To embody this Freirean love in practice, educators must see their students as whole people, beyond just learners within the classroom. Freire says that liberation comes from that very necessity to fight systemic inequities as an act of love (1970), opposed to the lovelessness at the heart of oppressors violence. This means making them feel truly seen, like no one else does, getting to know them as individuals, and creating meaningful connections. Love, in this radical sense, is not abstract, it is an intentional act of care and recognition that resists the dehumanization inherent in dominant educational structures. Critical Pedagogy is an approach that challenges the traditional forms of formal education not only in methodological terms, but

also epistemologically. For Freire (2005), knowledge of reality is produced through collective reflection and action, and therefore through a dialectical unity of subjectivity and objectivity. This model of education proposed by Freire which would enable the oppressed to liberate themselves through their own thinking process involves looking at major structures that affect people, that produce oppression and homelessness. The purpose of education then is to enable people to think about root causes that affect them and then eliminate those root causes to make the problem better. Further, other scholars like hooks (1994) have built on Freirian approaches, particularly related to race and gender within critical pedagogy as a theoretical heuristic. This, at times, involves critiquing liberation within Freire's work itself. hooks (1994), for example, pointed out that Freire's (2005) concept of freedom is always linked to the experience of patriarchal manhood. hooks (1994) identified with Freire's writing and linked the process of decolonization to the process of *conscientization*. Her educational experiences in both racially segregated and desegregated schools in the United States were influential for her proposal of engaged pedagogy. hooks' *Teaching to Transgress* (1994) further underscores the need to view education as a liberatory practice that dismantles hierarchies and fosters critical consciousness. She calls for classrooms that are not merely sites of knowledge transfer but spaces where students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds (1994), can engage in dialogue, resist oppression, and reimagine their futures. In the context of youth homelessness prevention, this means creating learning environments that do not reproduce systemic inequalities but instead act as spaces of radical care and possibility. When educational institutions commit to love as a pedagogical and political practice, they shift from being exclusionary systems of discipline and control to becoming sites of empowerment, advocacy, and transformation.

Building on bell hooks' understanding of love (1994) as the practice of freedom, in tandem with Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, offers a way to reconsider how educational institutions can support young people experiencing homelessness. Centering love as an ethical and political commitment reframes both research and education, not as neutral or sentimental endeavors, but as radical acts of care. This commitment grounds my use of autoethnography, where self-reflection and vulnerability become tools to expose how policies and institutions shape students' lives. Through this lens, researchers with lived experience of homelessness can disrupt dominant narratives and offer counter-stories that prioritize relational accountability and

justice. hooks' emphasis on engaged pedagogy extends into policy analysis, inviting us to ask not only what is wrong, but also what kind of world we want to build.

Self-reflection and vulnerability, as related to the type of radical love that hooks describes (1994), guides my approach to autoethnography and recognition of the value of personal narrative and lived experience, in this thesis. Through this theoretical lens, I posit that through my below written autoethnography, researchers with lived experience of homelessness can expose how policies and institutional structures either foster or obstruct educational access, shedding light on the emotional and material realities that shape students' lives. This approach not only challenges dominant narratives but also affirms the voices of those often marginalized in policymaking. hooks' emphasis on engaged pedagogy and love holds strong for policy analysis as well, prompting methods which move beyond technical critique toward transformation. A love-infused qualitative research policy analysis could ask: How do policies reinforce cycles of dispossession? What alternatives would prioritize care, safety, and belonging for unhoused youth? Together, hooks' theoretical way to encircle what we are doing with love, in this case, how autoethnography and policy analysis act as complementary tools to unearth both the lived consequences of policy and the potential for transformative change towards prevention, helps us position my work, and the love I take and give while doing it, as not sentimental. It is an active, radical force that grounds research in care, relational accountability, and a deep commitment to social justice and the prevention of systemic harm.

By embedding love in the process of research and the processes of engaged critical pedagogy in the classroom as a method of prevention, educational institutions can be redesigned not merely to accommodate but to genuinely empower young people experiencing homelessness, ensuring that they are seen, heard, and supported in ways that affirm their humanity and potential.

Beyond Freire: Emancipatory Education and Youth Homelessness Prevention

As an educator, I advocate for a more critical pedagogy, over that of traditional banking education, which challenges the dominant capitalist and oppressive banking model that currently shapes Canadian education. This shift is not just about changing teaching methods but about fundamentally rethinking the purpose of education itself. By emphasizing praxis, love, and dialogue in my practice, I actively work to counter systemic oppression and injustice in the

classroom. These approaches align with alternative educational philosophies rooted in the work of Freire, Tuck and Yang, which prioritize decolonizing (and disrupting) educational spaces and fostering critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Tuck and Yang, 2012). Freire, for example, says that it stems in how we are ingrained to think as oppressed that we then within an unchanged system, (of capitalism and neoliberalism), feel the need to want land, and to prescribe to others the role of oppressed (1970, ch 1). “There perception of themselves as oppressed, is impaired by their submergion in the reality of oppression” (Freire, 1970, ch 1). Tuck and Yang further push this very same idea of disrupting educational spaces by saying that decolonization is not a metaphor (2012) and that these conversations cannot even happen without the returning of land and our ingrained need to want land at the expense of others. In this thesis, exploring alternative more emancipatory educational approaches in relation to youth homelessness prevention in schools with hopes to highlight how transformative education can disrupt cycles of oppression for young people rather than reinforce them.

Theoretical Framework Conclusion

Integrating Freire’s Critical Pedagogy (1970) into both my research and school-based practices offers a powerful tool for advancing youth homelessness prevention in Quebec. Freire’s emphasis on dialogue, critical consciousness, and education as a practice of freedom provides a framework for schools to disrupt, rather than reinforce, cycles of oppression that place young people at risk. Education, when grounded in critical pedagogy, becomes a space where all youth can question dominant narratives, challenge systemic barriers, and actively participate in shaping their futures.

Without integrating the critical approaches of Freire and Battiste, education risks perpetuating the very structures that contribute to youth homelessness. Battiste’s focus on decolonizing education further highlights the need to recognize diverse knowledges and lived experiences, particularly in contexts where systemic inequalities disproportionately affect Indigenous and other marginalized youth. Together, these frameworks emphasize the importance of student-centered, culturally responsive, and transformative practices.

By positioning youth as central agents of systemic change and embedding these insights into both policy and pedagogy, schools can shift from sites of social reproduction and obedience

to spaces of meaningful, emancipatory transformation. This shift is essential not only for preventing youth homelessness but also for fostering educational environments that promote equity, agency, love and social justice.

Methodology and Methods:

Methodology - Autoethnography - The "Why"?

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How does Quebec implement youth prevention practices both in and out of schools, and how can the education system play a more proactive role in youth homelessness prevention?
2. What limitations exist within current political, educational, and systemic prevention efforts? Where are additional prevention, early intervention efforts and policy developments needed to better support youth experiencing homelessness?
3. How does Quebec's current educational and housing policies equip schools to address the systemic causes of youth homelessness and housing precarity, if at all?

To answer these research questions, I have used an ethnographic methodology in tandem with both personal insight and systemic analysis. The core methodology guiding this study is autoethnography, a qualitative approach that allows for the integration of lived experiences with scholarly inquiry. This method offers a reflective lens through which I can examine my own journey and struggles within the broader context of youth homelessness and the education system. By juxtaposing personal narratives with critical pedagogy and autoethnography, I can explore the gaps and limitations in current prevention efforts, while also considering how educational institutions can play a more proactive role in liberating rather than oppressing people. Through this process, I aim to uncover not just the systemic issues at play, but also the potential for change within the education system, as I seek answers to the research questions outlined above.

Autoethnography

Autoethnography is a qualitative methodology that integrates lived experiences with scholarly analysis, drawing on narrative research traditions to explore personal stories within broader systemic contexts using a reflexive approach (Cooper, & Lilyea, 2022; Sparkes, 2000; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020; Vasconcelos, 2011). By examining one's own beliefs and biases,

autoethnography (Vasconcelos, 2011) emphasizes the role of education in addressing social inequities. For educators, this approach is particularly helpful in identifying and addressing the ways in which their own perspectives and practices can either perpetuate or challenge these inequities. Autoethnography serves as a powerful methodological choice because it allows for a deep, personal engagement with the subject matter (Sparkes, 2000; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020; Vasconcelos, 2011), turning lived experiences into meaningful research. For me, autoethnography is not just a method; it is a healing process. Writing has always been a way to process and survive difficult experiences, especially during my time navigating homelessness and instability. Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (2011) highlight that field notes document the "everyday experiences" of individuals, providing rich, contextualized data that traditional methods often overlook. I began journaling as a means of survival, capturing my thoughts and feelings while moving from couch to couch. Over time, these journals evolved into a tool for reflection and change.

Ethnography involves studying and interpreting the culture and experiences of a group from a researcher's external perspective. Autoethnography builds on ethnographic methods by placing the researcher's own lived experience at the center of the inquiry, using personal narrative to explore and connect with broader cultural, social, or political contexts. Both approaches provide a framework to connect personal narratives to broader systemic issues (Sparkes, 2000; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020; Vasconcelos, 2011). In the case of this thesis, I use ethnographic methods to explore how educational institutions address, or fail to address, the needs of struggling students. By drawing on field notes including observations, and journals that document my experiences, I highlight the gaps and opportunities within the system. As a method, autoethnography can transform pain into a catalyst for change, allowing personal stories to be mobilized to inform and challenge educational policies and practices (Cooper, & Lilyea, 2022; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020). This method not only offers insights into individual experiences but also fosters a deeper understanding of the structural factors at play, making it an essential approach for research such as that presented in this thesis, which aims to understand and act on structural causes of homelessness.

As Cahnmann-Taylor (2008) writes, autoethnographic methodologies allow researchers to move "inward and outward," connecting personal experiences with societal issues, fostering empathy and understanding. As Narayan (2012) argues, personal narratives can illuminate the

structural factors that perpetuate marginalization, offering a foundation for systemic change. Through my experiences as a youth facing precarity and as an educator, I reflect on how these lived experiences shape my understanding of the education system's potential to prevent youth homelessness. Vasconcelos (2011) asks, “What has made me into the teacher I am?” For me, this journey is deeply influenced by my own experiences of precarity, which inform my research interests and aspirations for teaching and schools. Documenting my field notes, vignettes, and lived experiences as core data sources further challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge production, echoing feminist and participatory methodologies that value insider perspectives (Vasconcelos, 2011). Based on my own experiences of navigating precarity during my educational trajectory, I begin my research work with the knowledge that the education systems can better support youth to not only find stability, but can help youth better succeed in their learning trajectories. It is important to add that schools can also be sites where pedagogy and work are done to disrupt and change those systems, offering opportunities for transformation and empowerment.

As Sparkes (2000) notes, autoethnography allows researchers to "extend understanding" (p. 21), particularly in contexts of marginalization. This methodology produces "highly personalized accounts" that integrate reflexivity, allowing for self-interrogation and deeper insight into the researcher's lived experience (Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008; Sparkes, 2000). By reflecting on my journey through homelessness, teaching, and advocacy, I situate myself as both an insider to these issues and a researcher equipped to analyze them. This dual positionality will enable a unique contribution to the literature on educational equity and youth homelessness prevention.

As this thesis examines the ways in which schools may overcome systemic and structural barriers to better support youth homelessness prevention, autoethnography (Cooper, & Lilyea, 2022; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020) allows me to critique these gaps while drawing on personal and professional insights to propose actionable solutions. As Ellis (2009) suggests, autoethnography provides critical insights into who we are and the world we inhabit, highlighting the transformative potential of field notes to challenge and change educational policies. My field notes capture the disconnect between educational policies and the lived realities of precarious students, offering a critique that complements theoretical analyses. Through snapshots of my experiences with student housing precarity, teaching, and research, I use autoethnography to

challenge dominant narratives, reframing youth homelessness as a story of resilience, mental health, and the need for proactive educational policies (Ellis, 2009; Eisner, 2008).

Autoethnographic Data: Distinguishing Between Field Notes and Vignettes

In this study, I employed two distinct forms of autoethnographic data: field notes (Pacheco-Vega, 2019) and vignettes (Murphy et al., 2021). Although both contribute to the overall narrative and analysis, they serve fundamentally different methodological purposes and stem from different epistemological origins.

Field Notes (as Observational Data)

Field notes are a methodological tool used to systematically document direct observations made during the research process (Pacheco-Vega, 2019). These include descriptions of events, interactions, contexts, and anonymous observed behaviors within the field, particularly in school, street-school and community-based settings. The primary purpose of these notes is to capture real-time phenomena in order to later analyze them in relation to the research questions (Pacheco-Vega, 2019). Field notes are the method in which I documented these observations during my own experiences and practice as an educator, in order to answer my research questions. Field notes are empirical, descriptive, and tied directly to the external world observed by the researcher in action. This thesis draws from over 150 pages of field notes, providing observations related to my lived experiences and professional insights regarding homelessness and education in Quebec.

Subjectivity and Memory in Field notes

While field notes rely on subjective experiences, their value lies in their ability to capture the fluid and evolving nature of memory. In qualitative research, field notes serve as a vital tool for documenting immediate observations and insights during a researcher's engagement with the research environment. They offer a rich, contextualized account of the researcher’s interaction with the world, allowing for the documentation of nuanced details that might be overlooked in more structured forms of data collection. Although memory can change and evolve over time,

field notes preserve the researcher's first-hand impressions and the dynamic nature of these experiences in the moment (e.g. the identity and belonging field notes chapter below). This temporal richness allows researchers to later reflect on how their perspectives and understandings have shifted, offering deeper insights into the research process itself. Furthermore, field notes can reveal patterns in behavior and recurring themes, even when memories are imperfect, giving researchers a unique window into the lived realities of those they study. Despite the potential for memory to change over time, and the fluid nature of memory, narrative accounts remain valid and relevant for analyzing educational policies and practices. Therefore, narratives, even when shaped by memory, offer a critical lens for examining educational policies and practices. As Morrison (1984) suggests, the act of "remembering" in research combines memory with critical reflection, creating a powerful tool for reimagining systemic structures. By doing autoethnography, researchers engage in "remembering" (Morrison, 1984), combining memory, experience, and reflection to critique and reimagine systems of power (Vasconcelos, 2011). This approach aligns with Richardson's (2000) argument that writing itself is a method of inquiry, allowing researchers to explore and articulate their understanding of complex social issues.

Vignettes (as Reflective and Constructed Narratives)

Vignettes (Murphy et al.,2021), by contrast, are not observational data but rather constructed, reflective narratives drawn from the researcher's subjective experiences, emotional responses, and personal journaling. Thus, the vignettes constitute a related but different method, providing additional sources of data. Vignettes draw from different reflections, journals, and memories, to provide narrative reflections to make sense and explore emotionally complex data to my analysis. As Murphy et al. (2021) emphasize, "using and analysing a vignette enables novice researchers to make sense of aspects of the qualitative research process and engage with it to appreciate terminology." Vignettes are more than anecdotal inserts; they are methodologically tools that are evidence-informed, and crafted with the express purpose of illuminating the inner workings of research, like affective dimensions. Further, Polkinghorne (2007) addresses validity issues in narrative research such as vignettes, noting that while narratives are influenced by personal experiences and memory, they provide meaningful insights into human actions and

social phenomena. Cooper and Lilyea (2022) emphasize the utility of lived experience in fostering change, arguing that subjective accounts can enrich our understanding of systemic issues. The vignettes, informed by memory and lived experience, provide valuable insights into the disconnect between educational policies and the lived realities of precarious students.

This is especially important when working with sensitive topics such as youth homelessness. As Murphy et al. (2021) further argue, "it is paramount when researching sensitive topics to consider carefully the construction of tools for collecting data, to ensure the study is ethically robust and explicitly addresses the research question." Developing vignettes is thus a purposeful, conscious process, ensuring that such narratives contribute to both the ethical integrity and analytical depth of my qualitative study. Whereas field notes reflect the external gaze of the researcher observing the world, vignettes offer an internal gaze. This also makes visible the researcher's positionality, vulnerabilities, and interpretive labor and are vital in understanding how meaning is constructed in qualitative inquiry. By clearly distinguishing between these two forms of data, this study engages data that mobilizes the depth and richness that autoethnographic inquiry affords.

Quebec's Plan - Critical Policy Analysis (Sandra, 1997) and Its Application

In addition to an autoethnographic exploration from my position as someone with lived experience and as an educator, this thesis engages in critical policy analysis (Sandra, 1997) using Hankivsky et al's (2014) IBPA framework to examine Quebec's Interministerial Action Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026), as a document which guides responses to homelessness in the province, including outlining the responsibilities of the Ministry of Education. Critical policy analysis, as articulated by Sandra (1997), involves examining policies not just for their stated intentions but for their broader societal impacts and the contexts in which they are created. This approach critiques the often abstract and detached nature of traditional policy analysis by emphasizing practical, actionable outcomes. Sandra's framework advocates for a policy analysis that is deeply engaged with the political and social realities, aiming to "do something about" (Sandra, 1997, p. 24) the issues under investigation, such as youth homelessness prevention. Her work highlights the importance of understanding the policy cycle as a process of constant creation and recreation within specific contexts, urging researchers to consider the power

dynamics and societal structures that influence policy formation (Sandra, 1997). This understanding prioritizes the significance of context, subjectivity, and the lived experiences of those affected by policies, making them particularly relevant for analyzing complex social issues like homelessness.

In tandem with my autoethnographic investigation, I aim to demonstrate that across both approaches, I am looking to explore systems/structures and prevention in a way that can help its application I am proposing for classroom practice. In this study, the analysis of this public document will be approached through the critical policy analysis framework outlined by Sandra (1997). This dual (IBPA framework and critical) approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the policy's intentions and its practical implications, addressing both its theoretical underpinnings and its real-world impacts. Sandra further argues (1997) that the policy cycle itself involves constant making and remaking within a specific context. Deconstructing and improving policies must begin with an acknowledgment of the context in which they are created (Sandra, 1997). This idea is essential for educational contexts, where policies are often shaped by specific systemic, structural and root factors. Sandra's work (1997) emphasizes that policy analysis should not be seen merely as an intellectual exercise but as a critical and political method. By addressing the power dynamics and societal structures at play, her framework ensures that policy analysis contributes to meaningful social change, and contributes to an understanding of the systems and structures that organize homelessness responses in Quebec.

One significant concern about using policy analysis as a method is the risk of oversimplifying complex societal issues by focusing solely on the policy's text without considering its broader context and impact. Sandra (1997) highlights that policies are often interpreted and used differently by various actors within the state, reflecting ongoing social and political power struggles. These concerns underscore the importance of a critical and context-aware approach to policy analysis, ensuring that it remains relevant and actionable in addressing the needs of marginalized populations, such as homeless youth. By bridging field notes of my own personal narratives with policy analysis, this study aims to propose actionable solutions that prioritize systemic stability, mental health, and better addresses root causes of youth homelessness in educational settings. Autoethnography (Cooper, & Lilyea, 2022; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020) not only provides a platform for personal reflection but also serves as a tool

for advocating systemic change, ensuring that educational policies are informed by the lived experiences of those they aim to serve.

Methods & Data Analysis

Williams (2019) Coding and Thematic Exploration of the Field notes **and Hankivsky's (2014) Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) - The "How"?**

Williams (2019) Coding and Thematic Exploration of the Field notes

To answer the research questions, data analysis was undertaken in two ways. It first involved the collection of field notes, which were later coded and thematically analyzed using Williams' method (2019) with the support of the "Libre QDA" coding tool, followed by a critical policy analysis (Sandra, 1997) using the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework (Hankivsky et al., 2014) to examine Quebec's Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026). The IBPA framework helps guide a critical analysis of policies by using the 12 IBPA guiding questions (Figure 2); further supported by the critical policy analysis grounding proposed by Sandra (1997). This approach emphasizes a comprehensive understanding of a policy analysis potential impact on youth experiencing homelessness, as well as a systemic view of the policy itself. These methods are strategically employed to address the research questions.

The analysis using William's approach explores my autoethnographic field notes, which include observations, from my experiences working with precariously housed students, as well as my own experiences as both a precarious young person navigating the education system and as a teacher who now works in that system. I use this approach to analysis first as it provides a tool that enables a structured exploration of recurring themes, patterns, and insights derived from personal narratives and professional observations. This method aligns with Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, which emphasize the importance of reflective practice and transformative learning, ensuring my methodological approach is in line with the overarching theoretical underpinnings of this project. Using Williams' Coding and Thematic Exploration (2019) revealed three primary themes: 1) "The Realities of Youth Experiencing Homelessness", 2) "Schools and Their Role in Homelessness Prevention", and 3) "Schools as Sites of Potential and Failure". These themes emerged in relation to my research questions and were identified through the coding and thematic exploration, identifying patterns or recurring ideas within my field notes, marking sections that related to topics relevant to homelessness prevention.

These field notes were not taken on specific days, but rather draw from journals and notes taken over 3 years, particularly after certain experiences marked me,including key moments during my own experiences of homelessness and precarity, teaching precarious and homeless students, and as a person navigating both the teacher and researcher position in a way that made me think or feel emotions (such as curiosity, anger or sadness). I would potentially later explore through vignettes.

This first step to the Williams coding and thematic exploration (2019) involves the preparing and organizing of the data. This involves transcribing the field notes online to a tool like LibreQDA. Once the data is transcribed, I, the researcher, become familiar with it by reading and rereading the content, making initial notes and identifying potential themes. For this project, these included: isolation, loneliness, survival, identity, belonging, solidarity, understanding my role as a teacher, the street, educational challenges, mistrust of schools, lack of support, disconnection, school as a site of failure, school as a site of potential, falling through the cracks, strengths of schools, areas of improvement in schools, mistrust of adults, guiding from adults, and mental health. By analyzing these autoethnographic reflections, I begin the analysis work to explore underlying systemic issues and propose actionable solutions for educational responses to homelessness.

Following organization of notes and initial identification of potential themes, I undertook open coding of the field notes using the LibreQDA tool. Open coding is where the data is broken down into smaller, manageable pieces, such as sentences or phrases, each of which is assigned a label, or "code," that captures its meaning. In some instances, researchers might apply codes to each individual line of data, particularly when the content is dense or rich with meaning. These sections were organized into two groups of data, one relating to my own trajectory and one to my professional experiences. Once initial coding was done, I refined and categorized the codes. This involves creating an organized list of all the codes along with their definitions and example quotes. This step ensures consistency throughout the analysis. At this stage, I also wrote myself memos to document insights, thoughts, and emerging ideas.

The final phase is theme development where after coding all the data, the researcher grouped related codes together to identify recurring patterns or themes. In this case, the initial coding from my own trajectory was further organized into two developed themes: “Identity and Belonging”, and “Mental Health/The Emotional Toll of Homelessness”. The initial codes from

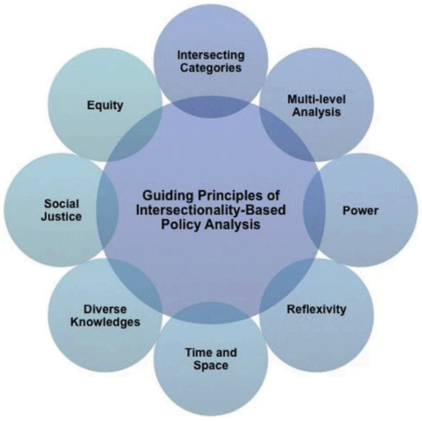
my professional experiences were also organized into three developed themes: “The Realities of Youth Experiencing Homelessness”; “Schools and Their Role in Homelessness Prevention”; and “Schools as Sites of Potential and Failure”. The themes were then reviewed for their meaningfulness to answering the research questions. This was followed by each theme being given a concise label that captures its essence, with clear descriptions or narratives explaining each theme which I further express in my autoethnographic field notes chapter.

Hankivsky et al.’s (2014) Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) of Quebec's Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026)

The second component focuses on the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework to critically examine Quebec's Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026). The IBPA framework, developed by Hankivsky et al. (2014), provides a structured, user-friendly template approach to analyzing complex dimensions of intersectionality within policies. Originally designed for public health, Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) is particularly well-suited for this research due to its structured and innovative approach to critical policy analysis. As outlined by Hankivsky et al.’s (2014), IBPA utilizes guiding principles and targeted questions to examine policy contexts in depth, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation of their implications. Additionally, this framework captures multiple dimensions of policy impact, placing a strong emphasis on the lived experiences of marginalized populations. This focus is essential for understanding how educational and social policies affect those who are most affected by homelessness. Furthermore, IBPA encourages transformative insights by promoting the development of more inclusive policy solutions that address systemic inequities, as emphasized by Hankivsky et al. (2014).

The first part of the IBPA framework consists of guiding principles (see Hankivsky’s Figure 1) which itself includes 8 principles for this analysis. The second part makes reference to 12 guiding questions (see Figure 2), divided into descriptive and transformative sections. The descriptive questions focus on identifying policy problems, their construction, and the underlying assumptions. This analysis reveals how policies may perpetuate inequalities or fail to address key issues. The transformative questions explore alternative solutions, aiming to reduce these inequalities by proposing inclusive and intersectional policy interventions.

Figure 1



Guiding principles of Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis.

(Fig. 1 Hankivsky *et al.*,2014)

Figure 2

Descriptive & transformative overarching questions of IBPA.

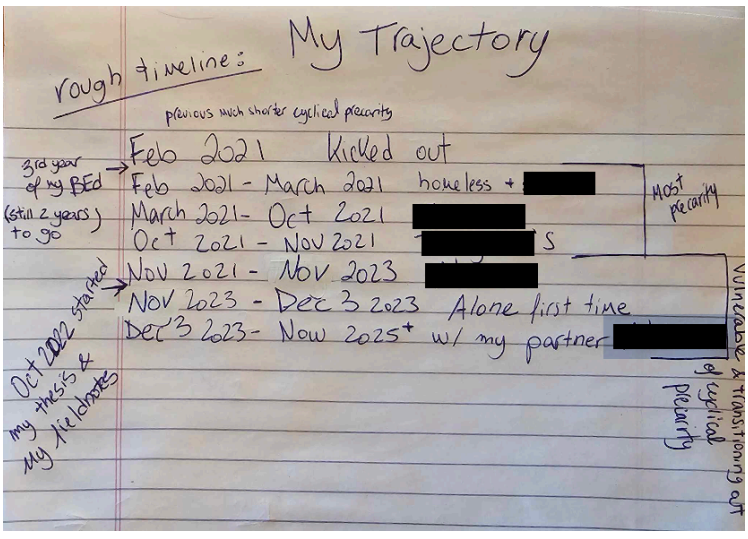
(Fig. 2 Hankivsky *et al.*,2014)

To conclude, this method's chapter outlines a two-part approach that leverages both autoethnographic thematic coding and exploration (Williams, 2019) to field notes and the intersectionality framework (Hankivsky et al., 2014) to analyze Quebec policy as data. These approaches (Williams, 2019;Hankivsky *et al.*,2014; Sandra, 1997) work well with the Frerian theoretical framework I use in this research as they emphasize reflexivity, critical engagement with experience and structures of power, and actions to address injustice in policy and practice. The combination of lived experience from field notes containing personal narratives and structured policy analysis ensures a well-rounded exploration of the issues at hand, ultimately contributing to more effective and inclusive policy solutions for youth at risk of homelessness.

Findings: Autoethnographic Exploration of Youth Homelessness in and Out of the Classroom

Autoethnography (Cooper, & Lilyea, 2022; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020) offers a unique lens through which to explore systemic issues and their effects, allowing my own experiences as a young person, teacher and as someone who has interacted with youth experiencing homelessness as a source of data. This autoethnographic reflection draws from over 150 pages of field notes made up of observations I've made both in and out of formal learning settings serving homeless and precarious youth. I also include reflections and other chapters in my field notes that I used to prompt myself to reflect on particular memories my field notes evoked. This chapter situates lived experiences as central to understanding how schools can prevent youth homelessness.

While field notes and vignettes are distinct in both form and function, the insights generated through the thematic coding of my field notes informed the development of the vignettes, which served as more constructed and reflective narratives this study used to deepen my engagement with the themes through personal, embodied, and interpretive lenses. In these selected vignettes, I illustrate the realities of youth homelessness in Quebec, emphasizing the role schools can play in prevention. I also examine the systemic gaps created by school policies and how these



gaps contribute to increased vulnerability of homelessness for youth. I present these as a base from which to propose better solutions to addressing trajectories of youth homelessness and education.

Both the work of Murphy et al. (2021) and Malenfant's work on field notes (2019) provide clear examples of how I will integrate "vignettes" from my field notes into this chapter. To integrate my field notes into the chapter itself I will begin each subsection of this chapter with an excerpt of text, a vignette, and a discussion of its analysis. These stories act as anchors, drawing connections between my observations and the broader themes that emerged in this study. Malenfant's work (2019) also helps position the researcher as an expert in their own reality, and this practice furthers the intention of my theoretical approach to this research in recognizing lived expertise (Freire, 1970). The following explores key themes that emerged in my analysis of fieldworks, reflecting the trajectory of my experiences navigating precarity, both as a student and later as a teacher (which can be better understood by the "my trajectory" timeline photo above).

Ethnographic Examples from My Own Trajectory

Identity and Belonging: Losing and Rebuilding Self

Vignette:

"It's strange how quickly your sense of self can unravel when you lose a home. For as long as I could remember, my identity was tied to my family, my Italian heritage, and the values I grew up with: loyalty, hard work, and perseverance. I used to feel proud of the person I was becoming (a dedicated student, a promising chef in training, someone who knew where they belonged). But when I lost my home, all of that seemed to vanish. Homelessness isn't just about not having a place to sleep. It's about losing your anchor and everything you find to be stable around you is flipped into chaos. I found myself moving from one friend's couch to another, each night spent in borrowed spaces where I never fully belonged. Never my own, always with different rules to follow. With each passing day, I felt more detached from the person I used to be. My soul was confused. I wasn't the hardworking student or the passionate chef anymore. I was simply "that person who didn't have a home."

"The stigma was suffocating. People in my bachelor's cohort, people I saw as friends, now started to see me through the lens of homelessness and made assumptions: I must be lazy or irresponsible, I must be on drugs, or I must have done something horrible at home, something I don't want to share with my cohort. The shame crept into every interaction. I avoided eye contact with classmates, stopped speaking up in group discussions, and avoided events where I couldn't hide the reality of my situation like going for multiple expenses drinks after class when I was

going through it. I didn't have clean clothes, a charged phone or even lunch like the others while in University. The systems that were supposed to help didn't see me either. There was no tailored support, no acknowledgment of how my experiences shaped my challenges. Instead, I felt invisible. What made me feel this way? Well, I was pushed to the margins by a system that couldn't look beyond my instability to see my potential. I remember one moment vividly: sitting in a classroom while a professor, whose name I won't mention, spoke about perseverance as the key to success. I felt like an outsider listening to a language I didn't understand. Resilience became this funny word for me. How could I focus on "success" when I didn't even know where I'd sleep that night? My struggles weren't just ignored; they were incompatible with the narratives I was expected to fit into.

Rebuilding myself wasn't a sudden transformation. It was very slow, pieced together over time, with moments of connection and support that felt like lifelines. Who am I now? How will things play out for me? Will I always be remembered this way? The kindness of a mentor, Dr. Emmanuel, saw my potential beyond my circumstances. Classmates who invited me to study together like that of Stuart (I refer to in the acknowledgement section), unknowingly helped me feel less invisible. These were key people who helped me grow. It was through these moments that I began to reclaim pieces of my identity, pieces that weren't defined by where I slept but by who I was at my core… even after losing a lot of me. What was left and here to stay? Even now, I carry the weight of those experiences, but they've also reshaped my understanding of belonging. I've learned that identity isn't just about where you come from or what you achieve; it's about how you choose to show up for yourself and others, even when the world tries to make you feel invisible."

This vignette illustrates how homelessness is not merely the loss of housing; it is a disruption of identity, belonging, and visibility within social, educational, and institutional systems. This reflection shows that it can be difficult to distinguish the systemic factors that organize homelessness from the individual difficulties, stigma, and struggles that shape individual experiences of homelessness, where people are often framed as being at fault, and forces such as capitalism and neoliberalism that shape institutions and social experiences can be invisibilized. The broken sense of self I describe, going from a hardworking student and chef-in-training to feeling invisible, was not simply an internal crisis; it was the direct result of navigating systems that failed to acknowledge, let alone support, precariously housed students. Neoliberal narratives of perseverance and self-reliance, such as the professor's lecture on "success" and "resilience", erase structural barriers and place the burden of overcoming adversity solely on the individual. These narratives ignore the material realities of students experiencing homelessness, where access to food, stability, and basic dignity are not guaranteed. The expectation that one can "work harder" or "be more resilient" becomes meaningless when fundamental needs remain unmet.

Moreover, capitalism and settler colonialism shape who is considered deserving of care and support, a dynamic that is deeply embedded in Quebec's sociopolitical context. The Quebec policy plan to end homelessness (2021-2026), for example, is published exclusively in French, a choice that may, on the surface, align with efforts to protect Quebecois language and culture. From this perspective, the use of French could be framed as an act of care for Quebec's linguistic identity, rooted in a history of cultural survival amid Anglophone dominance. However, this framing also obscures the exclusionary consequences of such a policy choice.

By privileging French, the policy implicitly delineates who is seen as part of the community worthy of care, sidelining non-Francophone populations, particularly immigrant, Indigenous, and Anglophone communities, who may already face systemic barriers. This approach reinforces a narrow definition of belonging that aligns with Quebec's cultural nationalism but risks invisibilizing the structural realities of homelessness for those outside this linguistic identity. In a province where Indigenous communities have their own languages and histories of colonial displacement, and where many unhoused individuals are immigrants or racialized Anglophones, the policy's linguistic exclusivity becomes not just a matter of cultural protection but also a mechanism of exclusion.

This tension highlights a broader issue: efforts to protect cultural identity within settler colonial contexts can unintentionally (or intentionally) perpetuate hierarchies of care, determining who is visible to policy and who remains marginalized. In this way, the language of the policy is not neutral, it actively shapes access to resources, recognition, and rights.

The stigma of homelessness, being perceived as "lazy" or "irresponsible", mirrors broader capitalist logics that equate human worth with productivity. Within the university setting, where students are expected to navigate academia with minimal institutional support, those who cannot conform to this mold are pushed to the margins. The absence of trauma-informed, tailored support for homeless students is not an oversight; it is a structural exclusion embedded within a system that prioritizes high-achieving, financially stable students with disposable income available for the institution over those who experience instability. It also assumes that students are not experiencing homelessness, and that this only happens to other individuals. This assumption, however, is deeply intertwined with settler colonialism in Canada, which shapes homelessness intrinsically (Thistle, 2017; Ansloos, 2021). While settler colonial frameworks render Indigenous peoples disproportionately at- risk to homelessness, through systemic land

dispossession, cultural erasure, and ongoing colonial violence, settler students who experience homelessness still navigate systems that privilege them. My own experiences of homelessness reveal how my settler identity and whiteness provided me with options and pathways that were inaccessible to my Indigenous peers, who were simultaneously grappling with unique forms of loss tied to land, home, and culture. This disparity is not incidental; when settlers are displaced, they are still positioned within colonial systems that deem them more deserving of care. This raises critical questions: How do we account for the layered inequities within student homelessness? How does the university, as a colonial institution, reproduce these hierarchies of deservingness? And how do trauma-informed practices, when they exist, fail to confront these deeper colonial logics? The moment of invisibility I describe, sitting in a classroom, unable to participate in the discourse of perseverance, underscores how institutions are structured to accommodate only those who already possess the privilege of being physically and emotionally present in a space where stability enables them to sit, talk, and listen within that act. When homelessness becomes incompatible with the expectations placed on students, it is not the system that shifts to provide support; rather, the student is forced into silence, isolation, or departure.

Yet, the process of rebuilding identity, through relationships and connection, also reveals gaps in these inequitable structures, small but significant moments of human connection that offer resistance to the broader forces of exclusion. The kindness of a mentor, the inclusion from classmates, these were not just acts of individual generosity; they were moments that disrupted the structural invisibility imposed on me. They demonstrated that alternative modes of belonging and support are possible outside the rigid frameworks of capitalist individualism.

Ultimately, this vignette is not just a personal narrative; it anchors an argument against the ways in which homelessness is constructed and managed within educational institutions. It calls for a rethinking of how support is provided, not as charity for those who need help, but as a structural imperative that acknowledges homelessness as a product of systemic forces rather than simply personal failure. If educational spaces claim to foster learning and growth, they must also recognize the diverse material realities of students and work to create environments where no one is rendered invisible.

Mental Health: The Emotional Toll of Homelessness

Vignette:

"The emotional toll of homelessness is something I still carry, a weight that lingers in the quiet moments when I have time to think and am not worried about the next lesson to plan, evaluation to correct or how I'll deal with writing that PhD application one day. I was just a young man when I found myself with no home to return to, no plan, and no sense of how to move forward. The day I was kicked out wasn't just the loss of a roof over my head; it was the loss of everything familiar, everything I thought defined me. I thought I grew up with the Italian morals of family sticking together, yet here I was alone. It felt like I'd been thrown into free fall, and I didn't know when, or if, I'd land.

Without a stable place to stay, survival became my only focus. Each morning, I woke up not knowing where I'd sleep that night, or if the place I was staying at would no longer be good for me. I'd try to concentrate in class, but my mind would drift, consumed by questions I didn't have answers to. To this day, I am still so proud to have completed both a bachelors and having started a masters while the world was coming down on me. Would my friend still let me crash on their couch? How long before their family got tired of having me around? What if I ran out of places to go? The uncertainty weighed heavily on me, making it almost impossible to feel grounded and more like I was being crushed.

The isolation was just as unbearable a feeling I hadn't quite felt in other parts of my life. I felt like no one truly saw what I was going through. Maybe my partner Adriana saw this best… but that was about it. On the surface, I tried to hold it together, especially for her, but inside, I was crumbling. I didn't want to burden my friends or teachers with my reality, and the stigma around homelessness made me hesitant to reach out for help. I started to mistrust even the systems that claimed to support students like me. They didn't feel built for someone navigating the chaos I was living in.

One night stands out in particular. I was staying in a friend's basement (this was a cold, dark, and cluttered student apartment, nothing like I was used to having grown up in a middle class single family home). As I sat on the floor with my head in my hands, I realized just how far I felt from the person I used to be. I missed the days when I felt secure, when I could plan for the future instead of scrambling to survive the present. I tried to cry, but even the tears felt stuck, like I'd become numb to my own emotions, depressed I guess is what I felt.

The mental strain took its toll in ways I didn't fully understand at the time. I'd feel overwhelmed by the smallest tasks, paralyzed by decisions that should've been simple. Sleep was restless, and even when I did manage to close my eyes, I'd wake up with a jolt, panicked and disoriented. I started doubting myself, my worth, my ability to ever break free from the cycle I was trapped in.

But somewhere, in the midst of that darkness, I found tiny moments of light, small acts of kindness that reminded me I wasn't completely alone. A teacher who checked in without prying. A friend who shared their lunch without making me feel ashamed. My supervisors saying they could buy me lunch if I was stuck or their taking the time to talk and offer help finding housing when I was once again precarious. Those moments didn't erase the struggle, but they kept me going, one day at a time.

Looking back, I see now how much of myself I had to rebuild from those pieces. Homelessness wasn't just an experience; it was a broken vase, one that reshaped how I see the

world and my place in it. And while the scars are still there, they've also become a reminder of the oppression I've been through and the importance of creating spaces where no one has to feel as unseen and unsupported as I once did."

This vignette offers an intimate look into the psychological burden of homelessness, not just as a material condition but as an all-encompassing disruption of self, stability, and belonging. Beyond the immediate struggle of securing shelter, homelessness imposes an emotional toll that lingers far beyond the period of precarity itself. The experience of displacement fractures one's sense of identity, trust, and security, making it difficult to engage in education, maintain relationships, or even envision a future beyond survival.

The metaphor of the broken vase is central to understanding the long-term impact of homelessness. Like a vase that shatters upon impact, the loss of stable housing dismantles the structures that provide coherence and meaning in everyday life. However, rather than simply being "fixed," the reconstruction of identity after homelessness is uneven, marked by visible cracks that serve as reminders of past vulnerabilities, often linked to a high risk of recurrence (Fitzpatrick, Mackie, & Wood, 2021), and ultimately reinforces the cyclical nature that school-based prevention, as I argue, should more effectively seek to disrupt. This reframing challenges dominant narratives that view homelessness as a temporary setback rather than a transformative experience with lasting consequences.

Themes which emerged in the previous vignette emerge here as well: institutions, particularly educational spaces, are not designed to accommodate students experiencing homelessness. The sense of chaos described in the vignette refers to more than just the instability of housing; it speaks to the mental exhaustion of navigating a world that does not recognize or account for these struggles. Post-secondary spaces, as well as the K-12 schooling, echo limitations in that they operate on an assumption of stability such as regular attendance, focus, and participation are expected, but these expectations become almost impossible to meet when a student is preoccupied with finding a place to sleep. The absence of institutional mechanisms to recognize and address student homelessness results in further isolation and systemic exclusion often leading to an uneasy mental health.

The emotional toll of homelessness manifests in ways that extend beyond the immediate crisis. Feelings of invisibility, distrust, and self-doubt persist long after housing is secured. The inability to feel "grounded" during this period was not just about physical displacement but about

the psychological dissonance of existing in a system that did not acknowledge or validate the experience of homelessness. The crushing weight described in the vignette was the cumulative mental health effects of chronic uncertainty, stigma, and exhaustion, all elements that are rarely considered in mainstream discussions of academic success.

Ultimately, this analysis challenges the reader to reconsider how educational institutions conceptualize and respond to student homelessness and the mental health support offered, or lack thereof, to youth who need it. The experience described in the vignette is not an anomaly but a reflection of broader systemic failures that render certain students invisible. Addressing the emotional toll of homelessness requires more than just access to housing, it demands a fundamental shift in how institutions recognize, support, and validate the realities of students navigating these challenges.

Schools and Their Role in Homelessness Prevention

Vignette:

"The classroom was quieter than usual that day, a heavy silence hanging over the room as I wrapped up my lesson. My eyes kept drifting to one of my students. This was a bright, kind teenager whose attendance had become increasingly sporadic, often missing every monday and friday. I'd overheard murmurs in the hallways about him couch-surfing with friends, but he never brought it up, and I didn't push. I wanted to but thought I'd leave them the space. Still, the signs were there: the exhaustion etched into his face, the way he'd linger at his desk long after the bell rang, like he had nowhere else to be. The smaller and smaller lunches, if any.

Later that afternoon, I sat in a meeting with other staff members discussing student support. When his name came up, the conversation felt like a punch to the gut. "He's just lazy," someone said. "If he put in half the effort, he'd be fine." My stomach twisted, but for some reason I bit my tongue. It wasn't laziness I wanted to scream, it was survival. Pardon my language, but what the fuck? How could anyone focus on homework when they didn't know where they'd sleep that night? I wanted to get up and explode like a cartoon, "Do you even see him? Do you understand what he's carrying?"

This vignette is a window into the ways schools function as both spaces of potential prevention and sites of systemic harm for youth experiencing housing precarity. As an educator and researcher with lived experience of homelessness, I recognize that the classroom is more than just a learning environment, it is often an unintended battleground where students struggle against forces much larger than themselves. The student in this vignette is not just an individual

facing hardship; he is an example of how schools, through both action and inaction, can either support or further marginalize those in precarious situations and under oppression.

Moments like this crystallized for me how schools function on a spectrum where at their best, they are sites of structure, care, and critical resources for students experiencing homelessness. Teachers, counselors, and school staff can be lifelines, offering stability, meals, and even moments of respite. However, schools can also serve as spaces of exclusion when systemic gaps, biases, and rigid institutional structures fail to recognize or accommodate students facing housing insecurity.

Hearing my colleagues dismiss this student's struggles as laziness underscored a painful reality: the dominant narratives in education often erase the structural conditions shaping students' experiences. This reflects broader societal attitudes that frame homelessness as a personal failure rather than a compounded systemic and structural issue. It is a failure of the school system that homelessness remains an unspoken reality in many classrooms, and when it is noticed, it is often misinterpreted or outright ignored.

In reflecting on my transition from being a student navigating these challenges to becoming an educator witnessing these narratives from the "other side," I see the ways schools are both shaped by and contribute to systemic inequities. The 'broken vase' referenced to above aims to illuminate the idealized notion that schools exist purely as meritocratic institutions where effort alone determines success. This is a myth. Schools operate within larger social and economic systems that disproportionately impact marginalized youth. When teachers and administrators view students solely through the lens of effort and compliance, they fail to recognize the deeply embedded structural barriers that shape student outcomes.

This vignette is not just about a single student, it is about a broader pattern of educational neglect that renders homelessness invisible. If educators are not trained to recognize the signs of housing insecurity, if school policies do not account for the instability that many students face, then schools become complicit in perpetuating harm. My own experiences navigating homelessness deeply inform my approach to both research and pedagogy. I understand, in an embodied way, how school can be both a refuge and a space of alienation. When I was a student, there were teachers who recognized my struggles and extended grace, but there were also those who dismissed me, reinforcing a sense of invisibility. Now, as an educator, I see the ways these same narratives persist, the same dismissals, the same gaps in understanding.

This transition, from student to educator and from being unheard to having a voice in these conversations has shaped my research focus on homelessness prevention in schools. It is not enough for schools to merely offer support services if those services are inaccessible, stigmatized, or insufficient. Schools must actively work against systemic biases that render homeless students as problems rather than people in need of care.

Schools and Their Role in Homelessness Prevention

Vignette:

> "There was another time when I saw that potential come to life. A student who'd been missing school for weeks finally showed up in my gym class. After opening up about my own experiences, she opened up to me about what was going on; her family had been evicted, and she'd been staying in a shelter with her mom during the nights. I brought this to the school administration, and though it took much too long, weeks of advocating for this student, finally we got her connected with a local organization that provided housing support and counseling, one I had been volunteering at for about a year. Watching her return to school more consistently, a bit of light returning to her eyes, this was a reminder of what's possible when schools step up."

This moment, though a small victory, underscores a much larger issue that the system is not designed for stories of support and reengagement to be the norm. Rather, they occur despite the system, not because of it. The gaps in school-based responses to housing precarity mean that outcomes like this rely on the persistence of individual educators rather than an embedded, proactive support system. Research consistently highlights the absence of structural interventions within schools, leaving students experiencing homelessness to navigate these challenges largely alone (Gaetz, 2014; Hallett & Skrla, 2017).

The student's return to school was not the result of an effective institutional mechanism but of a patchy, almost lucky, advocacy and proper known access of external resources. This mirrors what the literature describes as the current systemic failure (Mackenzie, 2014) of schools to integrate cross-sector collaborations effectively. While many schools, if lucky enough to, have counselors and social workers, they are often underfunded and stretched thin, unable to provide the sustained, wraparound services necessary for students in crisis. Instead, policies tend to prioritize reactive interventions, such as crisis response teams and short-term aid, over the kind of preventative, primary systemic investments that could make a lasting impact (Nichols, 2016).

While embedding social workers in schools, fostering partnerships with community organizations, and training staff to recognize signs of homelessness are meaningful interventions, they do not address the root causes of youth homelessness or the systemic conditions that make educational institutions complicit in sustaining inequality. These measures, while beneficial for students in immediate need, function more as "add-and-stir" reforms (Battiste, 2013) rather than transformative systemic change. This is the tension in school-based prevention work where we as people who work/want to help with youth homelessness prevention, recognize that these supports can make a difference for students today, but we must also acknowledge that they do not dismantle the broader systems that produce housing precarity in the first place (Schwan et al., 2018; Battiste, 2013).

Rather than framing students who experience homelessness as "slipping through the cracks," it is more accurate to say that the cracks are the system itself. The fact that success stories like this are rare is not an accident, but an intentional by-product of an education system designed to prioritize normative, housed, and economically stable students. Schools have the potential to be transformative spaces, but only if we are willing to move beyond temporary solutions and invest in fundamental structural changes that address the root causes of housing insecurity among youth. This means recognizing schools as part of a broader social safety net rather than isolated institutions, shifting from a model of charity to one of justice, and ensuring that interventions are not merely about survival but about meaningful and sustained support for students in precarious situations.

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Schools as Sites of Potential and Failure

Schools hold the power to prevent youth homelessness but often fall short due to systemic barriers.

Vignette:

"I recall a day when a school meeting highlighted stark disparities in how support was allocated. I remember thinking: How are we supposed to help these kids if the system isn't set up to see them? This observation, where I recall a day in school, aligns with research showing that educators often interpret signs of struggle as indiscipline or lack of motivation, which pushes marginalized students further to the edges. For youth navigating housing precarity, schools can either be a lifeline or a source of additional harm. One student I worked with, on the verge of dropping out, finally received help after weeks of advocacy. This moment demonstrated both the

strengths and weaknesses of schools: the capacity to change lives exists, but only when systemic barriers like underfunding and insufficient staff support are addressed."

This vignette illustrates a core tension in the role of schools in youth homelessness prevention; this being that while schools could be powerful intervention points, they are often constrained by systemic barriers that prevent them from fully realizing this potential. My own experiences as both an educator and a community worker have made this contradiction painfully clear. The student's delayed access to support is not an anomaly but rather a predictable outcome of a system that was never designed to identify and respond to housing precarity in a timely or comprehensive manner.

Research has shown that schools often misinterpret the behaviors of students experiencing homelessness, tardiness, disengagement, absenteeism, not as symptoms of larger structural issues but as individual failings (Rahman et al., 2021). This punitive framing reinforces cycles of exclusion rather than fostering support. Moreover, Gaetz et al. (2016) emphasize that homelessness prevention requires integrated, cross-sector approaches, yet schools remain siloed from the very services that could make them more effective in addressing student precarity.

This raises a crucial question: are the reforms we advocate for merely "add-and-stir" solutions, or do they work toward dismantling the deeper systemic failures that reproduce educational inequity? While embedding social workers in schools, increasing trauma-informed training for educators, and strengthening school-community partnerships are critical steps, they remain piecemeal solutions unless accompanied by structural shifts in funding, policy, and institutional priorities. The fact that advocacy is often required just to secure basic support underscores that the system is functioning precisely as it was intended; to respond reactively, rather than proactively intervene in preventing youth homelessness.

What this vignette ultimately reveals is that schools are not neutral institutions; they are sites where broader social inequalities are either reinforced or challenged. Recognizing their potential requires a shift in how we conceptualize their role, not just as educational spaces but as essential components of a broader social safety net. If we fail to do so, the consequences are clear: students will continue to fall through the cracks, not because they are unseen, but because the system was never built to catch them in the first place.

The Realities of Youth Experiencing Homelessness

Vignette:

"It was a cold windy morning when a student lingered behind after class, their movements hesitant, their eyes darting nervously around the room. When they finally spoke, their voice trembled as they shared what they had been holding back for weeks: "I don't know where I'm staying tonight." The weight of those words settled heavily in the room. They described bouncing from one couch to another, never knowing how long they could stay, each day a blur of uncertainty and exhaustion.

"I just feel... invisible," they admitted, their eyes welling up. "It's like no one even notices what's going on." Their frustration wasn't just about the lack of stability at home; it was about the profound sense of isolation that came with it. This was a classic case of social disconnection compounded by the stigma of homelessness. Teachers rarely noticed the quiet exhaustion behind their late assignments or the shame behind their absences. Peers, focused on their own lives, didn't ask questions. And the system? It seemed blind to their struggles, offering little more than bureaucratic hurdles when what they really needed was tangible, compassionate support.

As my student spoke, I couldn't help but reflect on my own experience of precarity, moving from one temporary shelter to the next, unsure of what "home" truly meant. Like them, I had learned to mistrust the very systems meant to help, systems that often equated survival with resilience without addressing the deeper needs for connection and belonging. The student's words reminded me of how homelessness doesn't happen in isolation. Homelessness/precarity is the result of many variable forces not so easily pointed out by one single cause, be it interpersonal inequalities, systemic racism, family instability, many different forces push young people into the margins and then blame them for struggling to navigate a system designed to fail them.

This story echoed themes I see time and time again in my field notes: disconnection, mistrust of adults, and the cycle of invisibility that homelessness creates. Schools, I realized, have a unique opportunity to break this cycle, but too often, they act as passive observers rather than active agents of change. The absence of trauma-informed practices, the lack of mental health support, and the reliance on punishing measures further alienate students like this one. As my student left the classroom that day, I felt an overwhelming sense of urgency. What could I do? Surely I couldn't offer a place to stay while things straightened up to a minor as an adult in the "teacher" role. This story wasn't just theirs; it was part of a broader pattern, a systemic failure that continues to let down some of our most vulnerable youth. It was a reminder that schools need to do more than react to crises; they need to proactively address the barriers that lead to them. For this student, and countless others like them, feeling seen and supported in school could be the first step toward stability, belonging, and hope."

This vignette highlights both the systemic barriers and the transformative potential of schools in addressing youth homelessness. The student's story, marked by instability, exhaustion, and invisibility, mirrors a broader pattern of systemic neglect, where survival is mistaken for

resilience and individual struggles are detached from the structural forces that shape them. Their admission "I just feel... invisible" speaks to a larger crisis in schools where there is a failure to recognize and respond to housing instability as an urgent educational concern.

The vignette exemplifies how youth experiencing homelessness often remain unnoticed within educational institutions, not because their struggles are undetectable, but because schools, as they currently function, are not structured to identify and support them effectively. The absence of trauma-informed practices, the lack of mental health resources, and the overreliance on punitive measures contribute to the alienation of students like this one. Teachers may miss the signs like late assignments, absences, or quiet exhaustion while peers and administrators often remain unaware or unsure of how to help. This student's experience of feeling unseen is not an anomaly but a reflection of how schools, when unprepared, can reinforce cycles of disconnection and mistrust.

My own trajectory, having navigated similar experiences of precarity, shaped my understanding of these issues not just as an educator, but as someone who has firsthand knowledge of how disconnection, mistrust, and bureaucratic barriers deepen the struggles of youth experiencing homelessness. This perspective informs my approach to research, positioning lived experience as a critical lens through which to examine policy gaps, institutional shortcomings, and the urgent need for educational reform.

This vignette underscores the pressing need for systemic change. It is not enough for schools to respond to crises as they arise; they must be structured in ways that prevent them in the first place. This means rethinking primary prevention policies, embedding a more critical and emotional learning, prioritizing early identification, and fostering relationships where students feel seen before they reach a breaking point. If schools are to serve as true sites of potential rather than perpetrators of systemic failure, they must move beyond passive observation and become active agents of intervention and support.

Discussion and Conclusion

Autoethnography (Cooper, & Lilyea, 2022; Tilley-Lubbs, 2020), in conversation with the following policy analysis,gave me a chance to imagine a world of my own making; one where my voice matters, and my experiences aren’t just stories of survival but pathways to change.

Through this methodology, I could challenge the false narrative that youth experiencing homelessness are passive recipients of help, incapable of shaping their futures. This approach allowed me to explore core developed themes (Williams, 2019) of "Identity and Belonging", particularly how homelessness fractures one's sense of self and community, while also highlighting how spaces of inclusion, like schools, can foster healing and connection. By addressing systemic and root causes, such as underfunding and lack of cross-sectoral collaboration, schools can become transformative spaces. Yet, this potential is often undermined by the emotional toll of homelessness, where the weight of survival leaves little room for academic engagement or mental well-being. The theme of "Mental Health" and the "Emotional Toll of Homelessness" underscores how trauma, stigma, and instability deeply impact a youth's ability to thrive within educational systems. Without trauma-informed, youth supports, schools risk further isolating those already at the margins. In my case, writing is not just cathartic; it is revolutionary. My hope is that these stories are not only seen as stories but as reflections of systemic failures, but as lived experiences that could have been prevented and stories that sit at the intersection of "The Realities of Youth Experiencing Homelessness" and the educational spaces meant to support them. The outcomes of this work are intended to benefit youth in precarious situations, such as I was once in, the schools that support them, and the broader Quebec community.

By focusing on primary prevention efforts that directly address systemic and root causes of youth homelessness, issues that are too often underfunded and inadequately implemented, schools can become transformative spaces that go beyond simply supporting students in crisis. They can fulfill their dual role as both "Sites of Potential and Failure"; sites that, when properly equipped, prevent harm but, when under-resourced or misaligned, perpetuate cycles of exclusion. They can actively work to dismantle the systemic barriers that put youth at risk in the first place. This, I argue, is emancipatory education in action: an approach that not only equips students with knowledge but also seeks to undo the social inequities that obstruct their futures. To invoke Freire (1970), the right to education is not merely the right to attend school, it is the right to an education that empowers, liberates, and actively works against systemic harm. Without this commitment, education risks becoming another tool of exclusion, offering hope to some while denying it to others. When schools recognize their responsibility to both prevent and disrupt systemic harms, they become sites of social transformation rather than passive institutions.

Recognizing and addressing systemic harms and inequities as part of the educational mission is, therefore, an act of emancipation, one that transforms schools into sites of possibility rather than perpetuators of cycles of marginalization.

Policy Scan of the Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness and Educational Policy in Quebec

Introduction

In Quebec, school-based homelessness prevention strategies do not really exist, with few strategies integrated into broader social service frameworks, often emphasizing crisis responses over primary prevention (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021). The *Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance 2021-2026* is Quebec's primary policy framework for addressing homelessness. It coordinates efforts across multiple government ministries, including health, social services, education, and public safety, to implement a cohesive, province-wide strategy. The *Plan* outlines several initiatives aimed at addressing its causes by supporting people at-risk of homelessness. While the plan includes an entire section on prevention, it primarily frames prevention through a reactive lens, focusing on reducing immediate risks and vulnerabilities rather than investing in primary, COSS and structural interventions. This approach tends to emphasize short-term solutions over long-term systemic change. This contrasts with my focus on primary prevention, which seeks to disrupt the systemic factors that place youth at risk before they reach a point of crisis. While the plan does not specifically prioritize school settings, it indirectly encourages partnerships between schools and local community services to intervene early (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021) and outlines key responsibilities for the provincial Ministry of Education. However, by embedding education within a broader multi-ministerial strategy without giving it a central role, the plan risks underutilizing schools as critical spaces for early intervention and prevention. Furthermore, without a more explicit focus on schools as critical sites for early identification and support, the plan risks overlooking the transformative role educational institutions could play in youth homelessness prevention.

Using the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework developed by Hankivsky et al. (2014), to examine the Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026) provides the following findings. I first analyze gaps in youth homelessness prevention and relevant educational policies (using the Hankivsky's Fig. 1) before applying the IBPA framework's 12 guiding questions (Hankivsky's Fig. 2) to further unpack the implications of this policy.

Findings from the Plan's analysis: The Plan Prioritizes Institutional Management Over Youth-Centered Approaches

Using the Guiding Principles of Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (Hankivsky et al., 2014), The Interministerial Quebec Plan on Youth Homelessness Prevention (2021-2026) emphasizes institutional management over youth-centered approaches, reflecting a broader systemic focus that sidelines the lived experiences of youth. While the plan acknowledges the diverse "faces" of homelessness, considering factors like age, cultural identity, gender, and mental health, its treatment of youth remains superficial. Though youth are recognized as an at-risk group within its equity-focused guiding principles (Hankivsky et al., 2014), the plan lacks targeted interventions and fails to provide a comprehensive strategy for youth homelessness prevention.

This institutional focus leads to a gap between policy intent and impact. The plan's limited youth-specific measures highlight a failure to address structural and systemic causes of youth homelessness, instead placing responsibility on service providers rather than empowering youth themselves. Effective prevention requires policies grounded in lived experience and aimed at systemic transformation. This analysis reveals how current approaches fall short and offers a foundation for reimagining education systems as proactive spaces for prevention, not contributors to instability.

Language Choice

Diverse Knowledges (Hankivsky et al., 2014).

The third section of the Plan ("intersectorialité") acknowledges the diverse experiences of homelessness, recognizing that certain Indigenous peoples face heightened vulnerabilities due to systemic inequities. While the Plan references culturally adapted housing and partnerships with Indigenous organizations, its approach remains broad and fails to explicitly address how colonial legacies, intergenerational trauma, and systemic displacement contribute to homelessness across the lifecourse, particularly during adolescence.

This gap is further reflected in the Plan's lack of Indigenous language implementation, which limits accessibility and fails to affirm the cultural identities of Indigenous youth who speak Cree, Algonquin, or Inuktitut. Although the Plan highlights "cultural safety" in service

provision, it offers no concrete mechanisms for ensuring Indigenous knowledge informs policymaking beyond basic service adaptation. Indigenous youth are also not identified as a distinct group within the broader category of "vulnerable populations," obscuring the specific systemic inequities they face. Without frameworks for Indigenous-led decision-making or early intervention strategies rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing, the Plan situates Indigenous homelessness within generic service provision rather than recognizing it as a distinct issue requiring tailored, community-driven solutions.

To address these gaps, the Plan should not only be translated into English and Indigenous languages such as Cree, Algonquin, or Inuktitut but also integrate Indigenous knowledge systems into its foundation. Translation alone is insufficient; the Plan must also establish pathways for Indigenous communities to shape prevention strategies actively. This requires moving beyond service adaptation toward systemic change, centering Indigenous voices in policy making and designing culturally grounded, community-led interventions that reflect the realities Indigenous youth face.

Language and Implicit Exclusions

A critical analysis of the *Interministerial Quebec Plan on Youth Homelessness Prevention (2021–2026)* (Sandra, 1997) reveals key limitations, particularly regarding language accessibility. While the Plan claims a commitment to supporting all Quebecers, its exclusive use of French raises critical questions about who is considered a Quebecois/Quebecer and who is deemed worthy of access to services. Following Bill 96, the Plan is only available in the official language of Quebec, French, thereby excluding those who do not speak the language. This decision is not neutral; it actively shapes who can engage with, understand, and benefit from the policies outlined within the Plan. This linguistic exclusivity creates systemic barriers for Anglophone youth, Indigenous youth whose first language may not be French, and newcomers still learning the language. By failing to provide an English version or translations into other commonly spoken languages, the Plan signals, whether intentionally or not, who is considered deserving of support. This has real implications for accessibility: youth from marginalized linguistic communities face heightened barriers to understanding and engaging with the Plan, limiting their ability to access services intended to prevent homelessness.

While the Plan is primarily designed for policymakers, government officials, and community organization leaders involved in Quebec's provincial homelessness response, its language policy inadvertently limits broader community engagement. This exclusion is especially problematic given that effective youth homelessness prevention relies on community participation and cross-sector collaboration. The lack of linguistic inclusivity not only undermines the Plan's stated goals but also perpetuates systemic inequities, leaving out the very populations most at risk. If the aim is truly to support all youth, the language of the Plan itself must reflect this commitment to inclusivity. Translation into multiple languages is an essential first step, but achieving systemic equity requires deeper structural changes. Policies must be intentionally designed to address the cultural, linguistic, and systemic barriers that limit youth engagement. By embedding equity into the very framework of the Plan, Quebec can move toward prevention strategies that empower youth rather than reinforcing the systemic oppressions that contribute to homelessness.

Limiting Community Engagement

The Plan's narrow approach to community partnerships reflects a broader limitation in its engagement strategies. In addition to linguistic accessibility, systemic change requires the co-creation of policies with the very communities they aim to serve. This involves meaningful consultation, with both Anglophone and Indigenous-led decision-making, and the incorporation of diverse knowledge systems that challenge existing power dynamics.

Excludes Youth as Experts in Their Own Lives

Reflexivity and Accountability (Hankivsky et al., 2014).

The Plan presents reflexivity as a guiding principle, emphasizing the importance of adapting policies through ongoing consultation ("Chapitre 1, Écoute"). It highlights engagement with stakeholders such as community organizations, researchers, and policymakers, framing these collaborations as essential for shaping effective interventions. However, while the Plan acknowledges the need for inclusive decision-making, it does not meaningfully incorporate the perspectives of young people who have experienced homelessness or state care.

Reflexivity, as outlined in the Plan, operates within institutional and political structures that privilege expert-driven solutions, often imagined as stemming from professional or academic expertise, over lived experience. The document emphasizes consultations with service providers but does not specify whether youth who have navigated homelessness were actively involved in shaping prevention strategies. This absence reinforces a top-down approach where decisions are made about young people rather than with them. Early prevention efforts require insights from those who have been through the system, young people who have encountered the gaps, barriers, and failures firsthand. Their knowledge is critical in identifying the specific points where intervention is needed most, yet the Plan does not establish mechanisms for their participation.

By excluding youth from these conversations, the Plan misses an opportunity to create practices that address the realities of homelessness at its earliest stages. Accountability in policy should extend beyond consulting service providers and involve measurable outcomes that reflect youth-centered success. Evaluating reductions in absenteeism, improvements in academic performance, and decreases in youth homelessness rates within school districts can serve as key indicators of progress (Zalaznick, 2023; National Center for Youth Law & Child Trends, 2023). Drawing on the interministerial plan and existing data, tracking the number of students identified as at risk and successfully connected to housing, and other, services provides concrete evidence of impact (Kritz & Batsa, 2020; Fitzpatrick, 2005; Gubbels, Van der Put & Assink, 2019). Analysis of these trends over time can highlight the effectiveness of interventions, ensuring that resources are allocated strategically to address inequities. Such accountability frameworks are essential in assessing whether policies are truly meeting the needs of youth or merely sustaining surface-level solutions.

Although the Plan uses the language of integration, its practical application remains insufficient, particularly in addressing the role that education can play in prevention. By failing to engage with the lived experiences of youth, the Plan risks reinforcing systemic inequities rather than dismantling them.

Power (Hankivsky et al., 2014).

Quebec's Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026) acknowledges the complexity of power dynamics, particularly between homeless individuals and service providers, by emphasizing a person-centered approach and the need to adapt services to individual needs.

However, while the Plan identifies youth as a distinct group affected by homelessness, it fails to establish meaningful pathways for youth participation in shaping the policies that impact them. The Plan highlights the importance of supporting "vulnerable youth passing to autonomy" (p. 18), but this framing positions youth as passive recipients of services rather than active agents in their own futures.

The absence of structured youth engagement perpetuates top-down decision-making, where interventions are designed for youth rather than with them. This approach overlooks critical frameworks, such as those proposed in Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005), which emphasizes participation as a tool for systemic change and liberation from oppressive structures. By not incorporating youth voices into policy design and implementation, the Plan denies young people opportunities to influence the very systems that shape their lives.

This lack of engagement is most evident in policies like the "Supplement for Rent for youth leaving foster care" (Section 1.1). While such measures address material needs, the Plan offers no indication that youth with lived experience were consulted during its development. This reinforces existing hierarchies, where decision-making power remains concentrated among policymakers and service providers. Without participatory mechanisms, youth are reduced to data points within externally driven assessments, rather than being recognized as experts on their own experiences.

For policies to be transformative, the Plan must move beyond tokenistic acknowledgments of youth vulnerability and actively create spaces for youth leadership in both policy development and implementation. Strategies like youth advisory councils offer concrete tools for ensuring that young people, especially those directly impacted by homelessness, can contribute to decisions that affect their lives. Embedding such practices would not only challenge existing power imbalances but also align with the Plan's stated commitment to individualized, person-centered care.

Furthermore, its development and implementation must center youth as experts in their own lives. This means directly consulting youth with lived experience of homelessness in plan design, ensuring that solutions reflect their needs, realities, and insights. Without youth-driven participation, the Plan risks reinforcing top-down approaches that overlook the very individuals it seeks to support. A truly preventative strategy must begin by listening to those who are most affected and ensuring they have a seat at the decision-making table.

Excluding Youth as Experts in Their Own Lives

Theoretically, the plan aims to equip decision-makers with strategies to address homelessness; however, it fails in this mission by excluding the voices of youth who experience homelessness firsthand, reinforcing a top-down approach that dismisses their agency. The Plan frequently references consultations with experts, policymakers, and decision-makers as the foundation for its approach to youth homelessness prevention. However, it fails to recognize youth themselves as holders of knowledge, agentic, capable change-makers who can take action in their own lives and as key stakeholders in shaping the very policies that affect them. The absence of youth voices in decision-making is not just an oversight but a reflection of an underlying assumption about who is seen as capable of contributing knowledge and who is perceived as a passive recipient of help.

How can policymakers determine what is best for homeless and precarious youth when they have never experienced these circumstances themselves? The assumption that adults in positions of power inherently know what is best for youth, without consulting them, reinforces the types of oppressive power structures that reinforce systemic inequity (Freire, 1970). It positions youth as empty vessels who lack agency, rather than as individuals with lived expertise who can articulate their own needs, challenges, and solutions as contributors in change. This exclusion raises a fundamental question: Who is this plan really designed for youth, or the institutions managing them?

The Plan's approach implicitly suggests that youth experiencing homelessness are incapable of making informed decisions about their own lives. Rather than seeing these young people as agentic and capable of understanding and changing one's world, the Plan treats them as individuals who have made mistakes and require intervention from those who "know better." This mindset erases youth agency and reinforces a top-down model of service provision that overlooks youth-driven, problem-posing solutions, peer support networks, and the importance of lived experience in shaping effective interventions. If the goal is truly to act on and prevent homelessness, then youth must be positioned as central actors in both policy design and implementation. Freire says that voice is a human right (1970). Without their voices, the plan risks being misaligned with the realities of those it claims to help, ultimately reproducing systemic barriers rather than dismantling them.

Lastly, leveraging community and youth-led advocacy (Nichols, 2016; Malenfant, 2022) may shift the policy discourse by amplifying voices with lived experience, making it politically and socially difficult to ignore the necessity of systemic intervention.

The Blame Is Put on Youth, Rather Than the System

Equity (Hankivsky et al., 2014).

The Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance 2021-2026 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021) identifies equity as a guiding principle, aiming to respect the diverse needs and realities of people experiencing homelessness. It acknowledges that certain populations, such as Indigenous peoples, racialized groups, and individuals with mental health challenges, face heightened risks. However, the Plan falls short in addressing the specific vulnerabilities of marginalized youth, particularly those transitioning out of child protection services. This oversight is critical, given that youth aging out of care are disproportionately represented in homelessness statistics (Nichols et al., 2020). Despite the Plan's overarching goal of reducing homelessness, it fails to confront how institutional pathways, such as child welfare systems, actively funnel youth into housing precarity.

While the Plan frames "vulnerability" as a key factor in homelessness, it predominantly focuses on individualized risk factors (e.g., mental health challenges, substance use) without interrogating the systemic and structural forces that create these vulnerabilities. This approach obscures the deeper institutional cracks that disproportionately impact marginalized youth. Rather than viewing young people as merely "falling through the cracks," it is more accurate to recognize the system itself as the crack; one that systematically fails youth, especially those exiting state care.

The Plan also lacks targeted prevention strategies that address these systemic gaps. It offers generalized objectives to support "youth in vulnerable situations" but fails to provide specific policies, accountability frameworks, or funding allocations that directly support youth transitioning from state care. For example, it does not propose mentorship programs, guaranteed housing supports post-care, or dedicated educational resources as intervention examples shown to reduce the risk of homelessness among this population.This absence of structural support highlights a fundamental flaw in the Plan: it centers on individual responsibility while neglecting

the state's role in creating and perpetuating housing precarity for marginalized youth. As Nichols et al. (2020) argue, without targeted interventions that address institutional failures, particularly within child welfare, youth will continue to be overrepresented in homelessness statistics.

Systemic Inequities in Educational Supports

The Plan further overlooks the critical role of education in preventing youth homelessness. Schools, particularly in under-resourced and socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, often lack the funding, staffing, and training necessary to identify and support students at risk of homelessness. While the Plan acknowledges the importance of cross-sector collaboration, it fails to outline concrete strategies that empower schools to act as protective spaces. This gap disproportionately affects marginalized youth. Structural inequities tied to race, class, and disability status mean that racialized youth, Indigenous students, and those from low-income families are more likely to face housing precarity and less likely to receive adequate support in school settings. Educational institutions, when underfunded and disconnected from social services, become sites where systemic inequities are reproduced rather than challenged and dismantled. For instance, the Plan does not address how funding disparities between schools in affluent and marginalized neighborhoods limit the ability of some schools to provide holistic student support, including early identification and intervention strategies for students at risk of homelessness. Nor does it consider the importance of trauma-informed educational practices, despite evidence that many youth experiencing homelessness have complex trauma histories that affect their engagement in school (Malenfant, 2022; Hopper, 2017).

Drawing on Freire's (1970) concept of education as a practice of liberation, it becomes clear that for schools to empower students, they must first address students' basic material needs. Freire emphasizes that meaningful learning cannot occur when learners face unmet survival needs, such as stable housing. The Plan's failure to integrate education as a site for systemic prevention reinforces a model that responds to homelessness only once crises occur, rather than intervening upstream.

Frames Prevention as a Reactive Lens

Although the Plan d'action interministériel en itinérance 2021-2026 (Gouvernement du Québec, 2021) claims to target systemic contributors to homelessness through interministerial collaboration (including education, health, and social services), its implementation ultimately adopts a reactive approach. Rather than focusing on proactive primary strategies that prevent housing precarity before it begins, the Plan emphasizes interventions that respond once youth are already in crisis.

For example, while the Plan promotes intersectoral collaboration, it fails to mandate concrete early identification strategies within schools or the integration of trauma-informed practices, both of which are critical tools for primary prevention. This omission is particularly problematic given that schools are often one of the first institutions able to identify youth at risk of homelessness. Without formal accountability measures or clear mandates for proactive school-based interventions, the Plan misses a key opportunity to disrupt pathways into homelessness.

This raises fundamental questions about accountability: How does the Plan ensure accountability when youth homelessness rates continue to rise? Its fragmented vision of prevention reflects a systemic failure to address the root causes of housing precarity, instead focusing on reactive measures that intervene only after instability has taken hold. By neglecting the structural factors that funnel youth into precarious living situations (such as underfunded education systems, gaps in child protection, and systemic inequities), the Plan perpetuates a cycle of crisis management rather than meaningful prevention.

Crisis-Oriented Prevention: A Flawed Approach

The Plan's interventions largely focus on tertiary prevention, responding to homelessness after it has already occurred, through crisis services like emergency shelters, rapid rehousing, and financial assistance. While these responses are necessary for immediate relief, they do little to prevent youth from entering homelessness in the first place. Even though the Plan coordinates actions across multiple sectors, including health and education, it stops short of mandating systemic reforms that would disrupt the institutional failures contributing to youth precarity.

By centering its efforts on crisis response rather than primary prevention, the Plan reinforces a reactive model that waits for youth to "fall through the cracks" before offering

support. For example, it does not establish long-term funding or accountability frameworks that require schools to implement early intervention strategies, nor does it allocate resources for community-based mentorship programs or transitional supports for youth exiting state care, despite evidence that these strategies effectively reduce homelessness risks (Nichols et al., 2020).

Time and Space (Hankivsky et al., 2014): Understanding Prevention Over the Long Term.

The Plan frames homelessness as a process that unfolds over time, emphasizing housing stability as the ultimate solution. However, its focus on securing long-term housing primarily reflects a tertiary prevention approach, intervening only after individuals have entered cycles of instability. While the Plan acknowledges that certain life transitions, such as aging out of youth protection or job loss, can heighten vulnerability, its strategies largely respond after these destabilizing events occur, rather than proactively mitigating risk factors beforehand. This reactive orientation significantly limits the Plan's ability to prevent youth homelessness. Although it includes some preventive measures, these tend to prioritize immediate housing solutions without addressing the systemic conditions that create precarity in the first place. For example, there are no mandated policies for schools to implement early risk assessments or trauma-informed curricula that could help identify and support at-risk youth long before a crisis emerges.

A more effective prevention strategy would integrate primary prevention efforts that operate in tandem with crisis responses. This means embedding early intervention strategies within schools, community services, and youth protection systems, enabling them to act as points of early support rather than merely crisis responders. By failing to take this comprehensive, time-sensitive approach, the Plan ultimately reinforces a system where prevention remains synonymous with crisis management.

Reinforcing a Failing Systemic Perspective

By framing homelessness primarily as a result of individual circumstance, such as personal trauma or poor life choices, rather than a consequence of systemic inequities and institutional failures, the Plan perpetuates a reactive, crisis-driven approach to prevention. This narrative places the burden of responsibility on youth, rather than addressing how structural factors, like underfunded schools, gaps in child welfare services, and systemic racism which

create conditions that funnel marginalized youth into homelessness. This focus on individualized solutions obscures the need for systemic reforms that could disrupt cycles of housing precarity before they begin. For instance, while the Plan supports rapid rehousing initiatives, it fails to invest in policies that ensure youth never lose stable housing in the first place, such as guaranteed post-care housing for youth exiting child protection or the integration of mental health services directly into schools. As a result, the Plan reinforces a model of prevention that is too little, too late. Instead of transforming education and social services into protective, empowering spaces, it positions them as sites of crisis response, intervening only after harm has occurred. To truly prevent youth homelessness, the Plan must shift from a reactive framework to one that recognizes and addresses the systemic roots of housing precarity, embedding prevention strategies within schools, community services, and policy structures that support youth long before they face the risk of homelessness.

Youth Prevention as Secondary to Adult-Focused Housing Responses

Social Justice & Intersecting Categories (Hankivsky et al., 2014).

The Interministerial Quebec Plan on Youth Homelessness Prevention (2021-2026) presents a stated commitment to "collective responsibility and inclusion" (p.8), emphasizing "prévention et les jeunes vulnérables" as a priority. However, while youth homelessness prevention is acknowledged within the Plan, its operationalization remains fragmented and underdeveloped. The Plan's approach leans heavily on reactive housing solutions, positioning youth prevention as secondary to adult-centered strategies, ultimately neglecting the complex, systemic factors that place young people at risk.

Despite advocating for intersectoral collaboration (Hankivsky et al., 2014; Nichols, 2016a; Becker, 2018; Kritz & Batsa, 2020), the Plan's cross-sectoral strategy falls short in practice, especially regarding the integration of the education system into youth homelessness prevention efforts. While the Plan references initiatives like the "Supplement for Rent for youth leaving foster care (Section 1.1)," these efforts are primarily situated within housing and social services, leaving education, an institution central to young people's lives, largely absent from proactive prevention strategies.

Extract on Youth Vulnerability and Housing Support (Action 1.1 and 1.2):

French Extract:

"Dès 2021-2022, la SHQ réservera aux jeunes les plus vulnérables au moins 100 unités de supplément au loyer pour une période de cinq ans. Le MSSS ajoutera les services d'accompagnement et de soutien social qui favoriseront la stabilité des jeunes. Il est souhaité par ailleurs que l'accompagnement offert dans le cadre de la présente action soit bien maillé aux services déjà existants au sein de la communauté." (pp. 18-19)

While the Plan offers targeted support for youth leaving care through rental supplements (a minimum of 100 units over five years), it assumes that financial assistance alone can effectively bridge the gap between state care and stable housing. This narrow focus overlooks the complexity of housing precarity, particularly for youth who have experienced institutional trauma. The Plan fails to provide a clear framework for how these young people will navigate the transition to independent living without wraparound supports, such as mental health services, mentorship programs, and educational guidance, resources critical for long-term stability.

Moreover, this approach risks marginalizing youth who have disengaged from traditional educational environments or who never accessed supportive services while in care. By narrowly prioritizing housing solutions without integrating educational supports, the Plan ignores the broader ecosystem required for youth to thrive. The Plan centers housing stability as a primary response but does not differentiate how youth experience housing precarity compared to adults. Despite references to social housing and rental assistance programs, the allocation of housing resources does not recognize disengagement as a potential warning sign that a young person may be at risk of losing stable housing. While the Plan coordinates actions across sectors, its reliance on post-crisis interventions fails to address the early risk factors and systemic inequities that funnel youth into homelessness.

By analyzing the Plan through the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) framework, it becomes clear that systemic youth homelessness prevention remains secondary to reactive housing interventions designed for adults. This oversight ignores the critical window of opportunity that youth-centered, primary strategies could provide. Prevention during adolescence can disrupt cycles of housing precarity before they extend into adulthood, yet the Plan's structure offers support only when young people become "homeless enough" to qualify for assistance.

In failing to recognize youth-specific pathways into homelessness and neglecting early intervention within key institutions like education, the Plan reinforces systemic gaps that leave vulnerable youth without adequate preventative support. A truly effective prevention strategy would prioritize early, holistic interventions that target the root causes of youth precarity, rather than defaulting to crisis management.

Does Not Prioritize School Settings

Schools must not only be equipped with resources but also operate within a framework that actively resists the systemic barriers placing youth at risk. This aligns with principles of emancipatory education, where policy becomes a tool for systemic change when it centers the voices and needs of marginalized youth.

The omission of school-based interventions is particularly striking given that the Plan itself acknowledges the need to break down silos between sectors. The stated goal is to "better coordinate existing services within communities" (p. 14), yet in practice, youth at risk of homelessness remain caught in bureaucratic gaps. Education and social services do not have clearly defined collaborative mechanisms within the Plan, despite evidence that school-based supports play a critical role in early identification and intervention.

This disconnect undermines the potential of schools as preventative sites. While the Plan highlights the need to dismantle silos: "Il s'avère nécessaire d'apprendre à collaborer pour sortir des silos... En opérant en silo, le système ajoute une couche de complexité aux problèmes vécus" (p. 14); it fails to provide the intersectoral coordination necessary to achieve this. Instead, the Plan sidelines schools, focusing primarily on reactive strategies that intervene only after housing instability has occurred. This neglects a core tenet of prevention outlined in the Plan itself: "Prévenir, c'est agir avant que les problèmes ne se produisent ou avant qu'une situation ne se détériore. Cela évite ainsi à une personne de trébucher, de dévier de sa trajectoire de mieux-être" (p. 17).

By failing to embed schools into its prevention strategy, the Plan reinforces a fragmented approach where the burden of youth homelessness response falls disproportionately on social services rather than being shared across the institutions that interact with young people daily.

This not only weakens its cross-sectoral ambitions but perpetuates the very siloed systems it claims to dismantle.

Policy Gaps and Missed Opportunities (Hankivsky et al., 2014)

The Plan emphasizes social and professional integration but does not directly engage education as a tool for prevention. Instead, it reduces education's role to vocational training, viewing it as a pathway for social "reinsertion" rather than as a proactive site for early identification and support. This narrow framing overlooks the potential of schools to provide stability and prevent homelessness before it occurs. The absence of a structured framework outlining the Ministry of Education's role in homelessness prevention reflects a significant gap in intersectoral coordination. Without clear mandates for schools or established partnerships between education and social services, many at-risk youth are left without essential support. The Plan's failure to integrate systemic accountability measures that directly engage schools, social services, and housing agencies ensures that prevention remains reactive, addressed only after housing stability has been lost.To align with its own prevention goals, the Plan should incorporate strategies that fully utilize schools as early intervention sites. This includes embedding educators, social workers, and community liaisons within school settings to identify and support at-risk youth, fostering a proactive rather than reactive approach.

Community and Cross-Sector Collaboration (COSS): A Stronger Model for Intersectoral Prevention

The concept of Community and Cross-Sector Collaboration (COSS), as outlined by Mackenzie and Thielking (2024), offers a more effective framework for the intersectoral coordination that the Plan aspires to but fails to fully realize. COSS emphasizes integrating government agencies, non-profits, schools, and community organizations to create comprehensive, cohesive responses to youth homelessness. While the Plan acknowledges the importance of breaking down silos, it stops short of embedding COSS principles into its structure. COSS directly addresses this gap by promoting sustained partnerships between education, social services, housing, and healthcare sectors. This approach ensures that interventions are not fragmented but instead coordinated across systems that interact with youth daily.

Schools could establish school-based support systems, such as designated social workers or liaisons, who can connect at-risk students with housing resources and social services. This cross-sectoral approach would create more comprehensive, integrated solutions to complex systemic issues within youth homelessness by coordinating services across sectors, doubling down on efforts and ensuring that more efficient, targeted interventions are happening (Becker, 2018; Hankivsky et al., 2014; Kritz & Batsa, 2020; Nichols, 2016a). This also means that schools should be collaborating with community organizations to offer services like counseling, and housing referrals directly within schools, improving the mental health needs of students. The growing focus on community-based solutions in the literature (Abramovich, 2017; Ansloos, 2022; Gaetz, 2018) reinforces this shift toward holistic, integrated models like COSS. Studies show that coordinated community responses lead to more sustainable outcomes for youth by addressing both immediate needs and underlying systemic causes (Becker, 2018; Kritz & Batsa, 2020).

The Plan could strengthen its interministerial approach by adopting COSS principles, formalizing partnerships between schools, social services, shelters, and mental health institutions. Embedding these connections into the policy would not only enhance early identification and intervention strategies but also align with the Plan's broader goals of inclusion, collective responsibility, and long-term prevention.

A Freirean Teacher's Transformative Youth Homelessness Prevention Toolkit

In this final section (found in the Appendix), I draw on my autoethnographic findings and policy analysis to provide a potential practical application of youth homelessness prevention approaches in classrooms, designed as a toolkit for teachers. This adhered to the idea that individual actions by educators can address systemic inequities in important ways, despite the fact that they are currently under-resourced to do so in response to youth homelessness. Recognizing that most educators seek clear, actionable strategies rather than dense theoretical jargon, I structured this toolkit to offer accessible, hands-on approaches that can be directly applied in the classroom. While grounded in critical pedagogy and youth homelessness prevention research, its primary focus is on practical implementation, empowering teachers to create inclusive, supportive learning environments, giving schools tools to play a bigger role in homelessness prevention than they currently do. Equally important are the parts of this toolkit that are designed to help both educators and students work together, humbly and collaboratively, to identify and dismantle systemic barriers and injustices that impact youth, particularly those most at risk of homelessness. This resource aims to not only inform but also inspire action, ensuring that education serves as a force for empowerment and liberation from oppressive systems.

Discussion

This thesis critically examines the systemic failings that perpetuate youth homelessness and proposes a theoretical framework for addressing these issues through education and policy. Specifically, it integrates Freire's Critical Pedagogy (1970) as a tool to advance youth homelessness prevention in Quebec, demonstrating how educational institutions can play a transformative role in disrupting systemic barriers. The findings of both the autoethnographic work and the Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) of the Interministerial Quebec Plan (2021-2026) highlight the gap between the current policies and the need for deeper, primary, systemic prevention. The discussion of findings is structured into three interconnected parts: beyond surface-level reform, putting Freirean principles into practice: developing practical tools, and my final considerations: implementing and discussing the toolkit, along with a section on how these findings link to the research questions.

Beyond Surface-Level Reform

To meaningfully prevent youth homelessness, interventions must move beyond surface-level reforms that merely modify existing structures without addressing their underlying inequities. The autoethnographic findings from my own experiences and field notes on youth homelessness in and out of the classroom reveal the emotional toll and identity struggles that homeless youth face. These youth often feel that their sense of belonging and identity is altered, adding a mental health burden that schools are ill-equipped to address. As demonstrated through these findings, if efforts to address youth homelessness within schools do not fundamentally challenge the systemic barriers that marginalize students, they risk becoming ineffective, albeit well-intentioned, attempts at prevention.

My analysis of the Quebec Interministerial Plan shows that institutional management is prioritized over youth-centered approaches. This approach fails to address the intersectional factors, such as language, youth agency, and the implicit exclusions, that perpetuate the problem. As identified through my IBPA findings, the Plan excludes youth as experts in their own lives and frames prevention primarily as a reactive measure, which limits its effectiveness. While there

has been significant research advocating for early intervention and preventative frameworks, too often these approaches assume that existing institutional structures can be leveraged for reform without fully interrogating their complicity in perpetuating inequality. This underscores the necessity for interventions that go beyond the superficial; rather, they must address the systemic issues contributing to homelessness. While significant research advocates for early intervention, these approaches often overlook the need for radical institutional change.

In this broader context, my contribution focuses on the transformative potential of schools as sites of systemic change. The autoethnographic findings also show how students experiencing homelessness face not only emotional and social marginalization but also systematic failure within educational institutions. Schools must not simply mitigate harm but take an active role in addressing the structural and systemic conditions that push young people to the margins. Freire's emancipatory education aligns with this call for systemic transformation. However, integrating Critical Pedagogy (CP) into existing school structures is fraught with challenges. As noted in my own reflections, there is a risk of CP being watered down into a reformist tool rather than a transformative approach that critiques systemic inequities.

Ideally, CP must be part of a broader movement to decolonize education, challenging the hierarchies and exclusionary mechanisms that play a role in sustaining youth homelessness. This approach would involve collaboration across sectors, integrating schools with housing organizations, and communities. Models such as the Upstream (Sohn, 2019) and the COSS (Mackenzie, 2014) provide blueprints for how schools can become proactive in preventing homelessness rather than reacting to crises. By establishing cross-sectoral partnerships, schools can address the root causes of homelessness, rather than merely treating its symptoms.

Ultimately, schools must shift from being sites of exclusion to spaces of liberation. This requires a commitment to Critical Pedagogy, where education serves as a tool for justice rather than a mechanism for reproducing systemic oppression. As my autoethnographic findings show, the role of schools in youth homelessness prevention is a site of potential, but this potential can only be fully realized when schools embrace their role as agents of systemic change.

Putting Freirean Principles into Practice: Developing Practical Tools

Building on the theoretical framework of Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970) and reflecting on the "sensibilisation" approach outlined in the Interministerial Plan, this thesis emphasizes the need for practical tools that educators can use to inform homelessness prevention practices in schools. These tools must account for the systemic barriers faced by students, offering actionable strategies for educators to implement in their practice today.

My IBPA findings indicate that Quebec's current prevention strategies prioritize adult-focused housing responses over youth-centered approaches, thus marginalizing the educational sector's role in addressing homelessness. To overcome this, schools can serve as central hubs for primary and secondary prevention efforts. They are uniquely positioned due to their structural mandate to support youth development, well-being, and social stability. As legal and institutional frameworks like the McKinney-Vento Act demonstrate, schools can provide critical stability for students experiencing homelessness, making them ideal environments for both immediate intervention and long-term prevention.

Furthermore, beyond their legal obligations, schools align with the broader theoretical and practical aims of education, particularly through the lens of critical pedagogy. When approached critically, education can challenge systemic inequalities and equip students with the tools to resist structures contributing to homelessness. The autoethnographic exploration highlights how schools can play a crucial role in providing safe spaces and support, while simultaneously confronting larger systemic issues that produce precarity. Moreover, homelessness prevention initiatives in schools should not only benefit students identified as at risk. Universal interventions, such as providing access to supportive resources, can benefit all students. By normalizing discussions about housing stability and systemic barriers, schools can promote a culture of collective care and shared responsibility, enhancing the well-being of the entire school community.

Final Considerations: Implementing and Discussing the Toolkit

The ultimate goal of this thesis and the toolkit is to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and practical application in schools, aligning with Freirean praxis. The toolkit includes a concrete, adaptable case study and a lesson plan designed to help educators implement Critical Pedagogy as a means of preventing youth homelessness. These practical examples will equip educators with strategies for recognizing and disrupting exclusionary policies, fostering student engagement, and integrating homelessness prevention into curricula.

The toolkit will not be a static resource; rather, it will evolve through ongoing dialogue with educators, youth, and community organizations. This aligns with my findings from both the autoethnographic exploration and the IBPA, which emphasize the importance of centering lived experiences and youth perspectives in both policy and educational interventions. By engaging youth who have lived experience of homelessness, the toolkit will be grounded in real-world insights and contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers youth face within the education system. This participatory approach not only reflects the needs of students experiencing homelessness but also empowers them as co-creators of educational strategies. As my findings suggest, youth are often excluded from the very systems that aim to help them, so ensuring they are central to the creation of solutions is a crucial step in overcoming their marginalization.

Ultimately, the toolkit aims to equip educators, students, and community advocates with the critical awareness and collective agency necessary to drive systemic change. While policy and governance require broader structural shifts, Freire's concept of liberation through education provides the tools to challenge oppressive systems. This thesis and its accompanying toolkit offer a framework to disrupt systemic barriers and demonstrate how education can be reclaimed as a site of resistance and possibility. Through these efforts, we can create conditions where no young person is left without the support they need to thrive, live safely, and achieve housing stability.

Conclusion

The preceding toolkit aims to provide a response to many of the questions I have explored in this thesis. In this conclusion, I return to my research questions. How does Quebec implement youth prevention practices both in and out of schools, and how can the education system play a more proactive role in youth homelessness prevention? My findings reveal that current prevention practices in Quebec fail to adequately engage schools as active participants in youth homelessness prevention. The Interministerial Plan's focus on institutional management, rather than youth-centered approaches, limits the potential for schools to play a more proactive role. Schools, as demonstrated through both my autoethnographic research and IBPA findings, have the capacity to be more than just reactive institutions. With a more integrated approach that includes cross-sectoral partnerships and critical pedagogical strategies, schools can become pivotal in youth homelessness prevention.

My second question was, what limitations exist within current political, educational, and systemic prevention efforts. The IBPA findings highlight key limitations in Quebec's current policies, including an overemphasis on adult-focused housing responses and a lack of youth-centered approaches. These policies, which exclude youth as experts and frame prevention as reactive rather than proactive, reinforce the systemic failures that perpetuate homelessness. The autoethnographic findings further underscore how these policies fail to address the real needs of youth experiencing homelessness, both inside and outside the classroom such as the emotional toll and identity struggles that homeless youth face.

Finally, Quebec's current policies adequately equip schools to address the systemic (and root) causes of youth homelessness and precarity. Based on both my autoethnographic and IBPA findings, Quebec's current policies do not adequately equip schools to address the systemic root causes of youth homelessness. The exclusion of schools from the core of prevention efforts, combined with the policy's failure to consider intersectionality and youth agency, reflects a broader failure to prioritize educational institutions as key players in tackling homelessness. To effectively address these root causes, Quebec must reassess its policy framework to place schools at the center of prevention efforts, integrating critical pedagogy and cross-sectoral collaborations into the education system.

We live in a world where the causes of youth homelessness could be better prevented, specifically in more primary and secondary ways as demonstrated by both my policy analysis and my autoethnographic exploration of the field notes, but systemic neoliberal inertia, privilege, and power imbalances often prevent those in control from making the necessary transformations. However, by embedding CP into educational practice, we can create the conditions for meaningful change; one where no young person is left without the support they need to thrive and live a happy life housed and safe.

Youth homelessness is not an isolated issue but a reflection of deeper systemic failures, many of which are perpetuated within the very institutions designed to support young people, like schools. Through an autoethnographic exploration of youth homelessness, both inside and outside the classroom, this research highlights the complex realities faced by young people who are homeless or living in precarious situations. A recurring theme in this research is the profound impact on identity and belonging. Youth who experience homelessness often navigate a deep sense of disconnection, from community, from education, and from themselves, intensifying feelings of isolation and marginalization. This emotional toll is not just anecdotal; it is deeply personal, reflected in my own trajectory and mirrored in the stories of countless young people. Mental health struggles emerge as a consistent thread, underlining the weight of homelessness on emotional well-being. Field notes drawn from my professional experiences further reveal the everyday realities of youth homelessness, exposing the critical role schools can play, either as spaces of potential or as sites of systemic failure.

Schools sit at a pivotal intersection where they can either intervene early to prevent homelessness or unknowingly contribute to it through neglect and exclusion. This research reveals that while schools hold potential as protective environments, they often fall short, constrained by systemic barriers, underfunding, and a reactive rather than proactive approach to prevention. Educators, often unprepared and under-resourced, struggle to meet the needs of students facing housing precarity. School counselors and community workers, though essential, are stretched thin, limiting their capacity to provide sustained, meaningful support. Moreover, administrators frequently prioritize academic performance over the holistic needs of the student, leaving gaps where intervention is most needed. In traditional educational settings, oppressed

students are frequently seen but not heard, perpetuating a cycle of invisibility that compounds their marginalization.

The Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) of Quebec's Interministerial Plan to End Homelessness (2021-2026) further reinforces these findings, revealing that systemic gaps in policy directly undermine efforts to prevent youth homelessness. The Plan prioritizes institutional management over youth-centered approaches, often sidelining the voices of young people who are experts in their own lives. Its framing positions prevention as a reactive measure rather than a proactive one, addressing issues only after they escalate into crises. Language and implicit exclusions within the Plan create barriers that leave youth marginalized, while systemic blame is subtly shifted onto young people themselves, rather than acknowledging the structural cracks that contribute to their precariousness. Schools, despite being critical sites for early identification and intervention, are notably absent from the Plan's prevention strategies. This omission signals a broader failure to recognize education as a frontline defense in preventing youth homelessness.

These findings underscore the urgent need for a shift in both educational practices and policy frameworks. Schools must become more than sites of academic instruction; they must evolve into spaces of liberation, capable of addressing the upstream factors that place youth at risk of homelessness. This requires a deliberate focus on primary and secondary prevention, including expanded mental health services, targeted support for marginalized students, and meaningful investments in schools within low-income communities. Such steps align with existing mandates to reduce dropout rates and improve educational attainment but also extend beyond them, addressing the root causes of housing precarity that schools are uniquely positioned to mitigate.

Central to this transformation is the adoption of Freirean approaches that emphasize critical pedagogy and social justice. Paulo Freire's model advocates for classrooms grounded in dialogue, where students are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their learning. This approach fosters environments where students' lived experiences are validated, and systemic inequities are critically examined. In the context of youth homelessness prevention, this means integrating curricula that explore housing precarity, systemic oppression, and

community resilience. It means empowering students to see themselves as agents of change, capable of challenging the very systems that marginalize them.

However, meaningful change requires more than pedagogical shifts. It demands systemic investment and collaborative action. Policymakers must prioritize funding for wraparound services within schools, ensuring that students have access to on-site housing liaisons, mental health care, and community support networks. Educators must receive specialized training to recognize and respond to the signs of housing precarity, moving beyond traditional academic metrics to address the holistic needs of their students. Community organizations must work alongside schools, providing mentorship and resources that extend beyond the classroom, creating safety nets that catch students before they fall into homelessness.

This research highlights that homelessness prevention cannot be reduced to reactive interventions or temporary solutions. It must be rooted in a long-term, systemic approach that recognizes education as a tool for empowerment. When schools embrace this role, they can shift from being sites of exclusion to becoming hubs of possibility, spaces where students are not only seen and heard but supported in building futures free from precarity.

Ultimately, the fight against youth homelessness is not just about providing shelter or resources after the fact. It is about transforming the systems that create and sustain vulnerability. It is about recognizing that when young people fall through the cracks, it is not a personal failure but a collective one; a crack in the system. Schools have the potential to be powerful agents of prevention, but only if we are willing to rethink their role, invest in their capacity, and center the voices of the youth they are meant to serve. Through this lens, education becomes not just a pathway out of homelessness, but a means of dismantling the very structures that allow it to exist.

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