

Providing Shelter: Homelessness in the Middle Grades

By Rajni Shankar-Brown

Many young adolescents have carved a permanent place in my heart and serve as daily inspiration for my life's work, but especially a student named Devin.

I met Devin while teaching language arts at a high poverty, high minority middle school in Charlotte, North Carolina. A few months into the school year, I learned that Devin had spent most of his life homeless.

Sadly, his story is far more common than you may imagine. In her book, *Schooling Homeless Children*, Sharon Quint reminds us, "Across this nation, thousands upon thousands of homeless children are growing up unnurtured, unloved, and uneducated" (p. 7). In fact, according to the National Center on Family Homelessness, more than 1.5 million children experience homelessness in the United States each year.

Young adolescents who are experiencing homelessness face relentless obstacles in school and life; homelessness adversely affects their physical, cognitive, social, and emotional development. In addition, homeless students are frequently socially and educationally marginalized.

I hope this article spurs much-needed conversations about educating homeless young adolescents.

Meeting Devin

Devin was 14 years old. He always wore a stained, ragged, faded-gray hoodie, even on sweltering hot days. The first day I met Devin we began what I now refer to as The Hoodie Battle. Our school's dress code prohibited students wearing hats in the building and Devin insisted on wearing his hood during class. When I asked Devin to take off his hood, he reacted in one of three ways: 1) Ignored me; 2) Reminded me that my class was not in fact in the building, as my classroom was a single-wide modular trailer; 3) Pulled the tie strings firmer to cover part of his face. The Hoodie Battle was only one of many challenges I encountered with Devin.

Although Devin struggled academically (drastically below grade level in reading and math), he was brilliant in other ways. For example, he had an incredible array of self-expression skills. He was able to intelligently discuss

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conflicting social forces such as freedom of expression and the school's stringent dress code. He had an amazing talent for impromptu rapping and beat boxing. He was also a self-taught origami master, able to transform paper into boxes, stars, and clearly identifiable animals.

Connecting with Devin

No matter how much I tried to engage Devin in his learning, he seemed apathetic. He spent most of his time in class staring into space, yawning, or sleeping. One day I asked Devin to remain after class.

During the first week of school, I had given each student a packet of information to take home, review, and have signed by a parent or guardian. Two months later (after constant reminders, failed incentives, and frequent pleading) I had still not received a form from Devin. I had attempted to call his home, but the number was disconnected. I gently asked him, yet again, about the form given during the first week of school. As always, he remained still and speechless. I suspected something was going on, but got little help from the busy administration in getting to the bottom of it.

One morning I stood outside my classroom and greeted my students as was my routine. Devin staggered to the door. "Good morning," I said with a smile. Instead of ignoring me as usual, he responded. I will never forget his response or the pain in his eyes. He looked at me and said, "I woke up next to a family. A family of nasty rats n' roaches n' crud. There's not a thing good about this morning." I had no idea what to say. Neither of us said another word about it that morning.

I wondered where Devin was living. I asked the other teachers on my team about Devin's situation, but they were clueless. He did not have a cumulative file folder and the phone number given to me by the main office was still disconnected.

I decided to leave Devin alone about wearing his hood in class—he had much larger battles in his life.

I always had high expectations for Devin. During the next few days, I tried to help him make connections in the classroom. I worked on improving his reading skills and pushed him academically, even when he acted annoyed or indifferent. I began leaving healthy snacks in his desk like granola bars, cheese cracker packs, and fruit. He would never say anything to me or I to him, but they always disappeared.

The following week, Devin asked if he could talk to me after class. I was stunned, nervous, and most of all, hopeful. After the bell rang, he stayed in his seat. His eyes filled with tears. He told me that I was the first person in his life to truly care about him. I had not given up on him, even when he tried to push me away. He thanked me for the snacks, which along with the free lunch at school was often the only food he ate all day.

He shared that he was living temporarily in an abandoned building with his mother. Previously, he had lived under bridges and on park benches. I learned that his father had died from a drug overdose when Devin was only six years old. He confided in me about the hardships he faced, and about how his mother had struggled since his father passed away.

Teaching Devin

Homeless students like Devin face many barriers to academic success, such as excessive absences, developmental delays, emotional trauma, physical ailments, and lack of appropriate hygiene tools or clothing. Devin eventually shared with me that his hoodie was his most valuable possession, which explained why he wore it every day. The hood made him feel safe.

After I found out that Devin was homeless, my empathy grew. I no longer consider his yawning or sleeping during class disrespectful or rude—he was exhausted. When a student is worried about basic human necessities such as food and shelter, learning about grammar is inherently low on the priority list.

School can be a safe haven or a place of bleakness for young adolescents. Before effective teaching and learning can occur, students must feel safe and secure. The value of educators showing compassion toward students and creating an inviting learning environment, especially at the middle level, is essential.

Although I could not change Devin's situation, as a teacher I had the opportunity to minimize the negative impact of homelessness in my classroom. I had the opportunity to help Devin build resilience and competency skills. I had the privilege of teaching Devin to believe in himself. I was able to provide *shelter* for him during the day.

Remembering Devin

I am proud to say that Devin graduated from high school, has a job that provides a stable income, and is currently attending college part-time. Although he was able to break the detrimental cycle of homelessness that daunts so many lives, he still struggles with its traumatic effects.

As I teach middle grades educators and continue my ongoing research in homeless education, Devin remains my guiding light. I learned many valuable lessons while teaching Devin. Today, I continue to embrace hope—hope that the educational needs of homeless young adolescents will be acknowledged and addressed, and schools will provide students living in extreme poverty the shelter they commonly seek or need.

A Call for Action

As middle level educators, we must join together to strengthen our commitment to meeting the needs of diverse 21st century learners, including the growing number of homeless young adolescents in our country. Although homelessness is a global issue, we must begin to address this critical concern in our nation.

We must find ways to provide *shelter* within our schools for the growing number of young adolescents experiencing homelessness...innocent and incredible students like Devin. ■