KCSOS
Kern County Superintendent of Schools

Unlocking The Power of Homeless Students in Evaluation

Empowering Voices, Driving Change

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WHAT IS EVALUATION & *Important*

Have you ever thought about what evaluation really means? Believe it or not, you're constantly collecting data and evaluating information throughout your day. It's in our nature as humans because our survival as a species depended on it! Think about it: within a mere seven seconds of meeting someone new, you're already making judgments about their likability, trustworthiness, and whether they pose any threat. That's the power of evaluation in action!

Now, evaluation may have different definitions depending on the approach and field of practice, but let's focus on one that resonates with our work in student programs. Evaluation is all about purposeful, systematic, and careful collection and analysis of information. It's about gathering data to document the effectiveness and impact of programs, establish accountability, and pinpoint areas that need improvement. In a nutshell, it's about understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and overall performance of a project, program, or initiative.

But here's the exciting part: evaluation goes way beyond just measuring outputs or activities. It's about gaining insights into the outcomes and impacts of these efforts. Evaluators use various methods like surveys, interviews, observations, and data analysis to gather evidence. And why do they do all this? To make informed decisions, improve program effectiveness, and drive positive change.

Evaluation is like a spark that ignites continuous improvement in student voice initiatives. By diving into the data and feedback collected through evaluation, educators and stakeholders can make evidence-based decisions. They can enhance the effectiveness and responsiveness of their programs, ensuring they meet the ever-changing needs of homeless students. But that's not all! The outcomes of evaluation can also be used as powerful ammunition to advocate for policy changes, secure increased resources, and improve support systems for homeless students. It's about using the evidence generated through evaluation to raise awareness, influence decision-makers, and fight for equitable educational opportunities for those in need.

When it comes to student voice initiatives, evaluation plays a pivotal role, especially when working with homeless students. It offers a comprehensive understanding of the impact and effectiveness of these initiatives in meeting their unique needs. By evaluating these programs, educators and their partners gain valuable insights into the outcomes and challenges faced by homeless students. Armed with this knowledge, they can make informed decisions and implement targeted interventions that truly make a difference. Evaluation helps identify what works well and what needs improvement, ensuring that efforts are focused and resources are allocated effectively.

"Being an evaluator allowed me to see firsthand the impact of student voice in driving positive change. It made me realize that students have the power to shape their own educational experiences and make a difference in the school community."

INVOLVING HOMELESS STUDENTS IN *Evalaution*

Evaluation holds the key to unlocking a brighter future for education, shaping policies, and nurturing growth. While adult evaluators bring valuable expertise, there's an invaluable perspective they often lack—the firsthand knowledge of students themselves. This is where the involvement of students becomes a game-changer. Their unique experiences and fresh outlook offer insights inaccessible to adults who rely solely on theory and practice.

For homeless students, evaluation becomes a powerful tool that empowers them, putting their experiences, voices, and perspectives at the center. It provides an opportunity for these students to actively participate in assessing the initiatives designed to support them. By involving homeless students in the evaluation process, we ignite a sense of ownership and agency, transforming them into active contributors who shape their own educational journey. Their voices matter, and their presence in decision-making processes is crucial. Through their insights, evaluation not only acknowledges the distinctive challenges faced by homeless students but also provides a platform for their perspectives to be genuinely heard and valued.

By engaging both homeless students and adults as partners in research, we tap into their collective expertise, unearthing deeper insights into how education policies and practices truly nurture student learning and development. Incorporating students throughout various research stages —design, implementation, analysis, and dissemination— enhances the accuracy and validity of findings. When it comes to data analysis, students bring a fresh lens, unveiling nuances and perspectives that may otherwise go unnoticed by adults. Their inclusion enriches the breadth

and depth of research, empowering them as active participants who shape their own educational experiences. This inclusive approach not only strengthens the credibility and precision of research findings but also nurtures students' sense of agency and ownership.

When homeless students become evaluators, the evaluation process transforms into an authentic and relevant exploration. Their firsthand experiences and unique insights become the secret ingredients that no one else can provide. By involving them, administrators gain a profound understanding of the challenges faced by homeless students within their school community. Homeless students' perspectives shed light on the intricate barriers they encounter and reveal potential gaps in resources and support. Their input enriches the evaluation process, capturing the subtle realities of homelessness and inspiring targeted and effective solutions.

Empowering homeless students as evaluators is more than just an act—it's a catalyst for change, fostering their agency and shaping their own education. By actively involving them in decision-making processes, we nurture their sense of belonging and ownership within the school community. It sends a resounding message that their voices hold immense value and that they have a direct say in matters that impact their lives. This empowerment ripples through every aspect of their educational journey, boosting self-esteem, motivation, and overall educational experience. As evaluators, these students become advocates for themselves and their peers, igniting a wave of positive change within the school environment.

Involving homeless students as evaluators serves as a powerful tool for building trust and fostering positive relationships between administrators and students. When administrators genuinely commit to including the voices of homeless students, it creates an environment of trust and credibility. Homeless students feel seen, heard, and valued, fostering a more inclusive and supportive school climate. Through active engagement in the evaluation process, administrators bridge the gap between their own perspectives and the experiences of homeless students. This collaborative approach builds stronger relationships, facilitates open communication, and fosters a shared responsibility for improving educational outcomes for all students.

Table 1. Benefits of Engaging Students in Evaluation of Student Voice Projects

Benefits for Students	Benefits for Adults	Benefits for Schools
• Build new skills. • Establish meaningful relationships with peers & adults. • Build self-confidence & see selves as change agents. • Create social change in programs, policies, & school that impact their lives.	• Offers adults fresh perspectives on their own professional approaches to their work. • Build strong & stable youth relationships. • Understand student voice & priorities. • Build collaboration skills & share decision making with young people.	• Discover new perspectives & ideas. • Programs become stronger, more appropriate, & better able to meet student needs. • Improve equity, quality, & relevance of school programs, policies, & services.

Sources: UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent. (2023). Youth Engagement Guide for Practitioners. Retrieved from https://developingadolescent.semel.ucla.edu/assets/uploads/research/resources/CDAYouthEngagementGuide_Practitioners_2023_2.pdf

ENGAGING HOMELESS STUDENTS IN EVALUATION
Best Practices

Recruiting: Building Trust and Overcoming Challenges

Establishing trust and building relationships are critical when recruiting homeless students as evaluators. Recognizing that they may have experienced marginalization or mistrust, adult evaluators must approach the recruitment process with sensitivity and empathy. Engaging with school administrators, social workers, and community organizations that work closely with homeless students can help establish connections and gain their support. Building relationships with trusted adults who have existing rapport with homeless students can also alleviate concerns and increase the likelihood of their participation. By actively listening, showing genuine interest, and addressing any apprehensions, evaluators can foster an environment of trust and collaboration.

Addressing unique challenges is essential when recruiting homeless students as evaluators. Transportation limitations, time constraints, and concerns about privacy and confidentiality can pose barriers. Proactive measures should be taken to address these challenges by providing necessary support and accommodations. Offering transportation assistance, such as bus passes or arranging convenient meeting locations, can help overcome transportation obstacles. Flexibility in scheduling research activities and providing adequate notice can accommodate the students' fluctuating circumstances. Assuring students of their privacy and confidentiality, and outlining protocols for data security and anonymity, can also increase their willingness to participate.

Incentives: Acknowledging Value and Empowering Engagement

Acknowledging the time, effort, and contributions of homeless student evaluators through incentives is crucial. Incentives help overcome barriers such as transportation limitations or financial constraints that homeless students may face, ensuring their meaningful participation. They also foster a sense of empowerment, motivation, and engagement among homeless students, reinforcing their value as evaluators.

Examples of incentives for homeless student evaluators can include transportation support, such as bus passes or reimbursed travel expenses, to facilitate their participation in research activities. Providing meals or snacks during research sessions ensures that students have access to nourishment, alleviating food insecurity concerns. Offering gift cards, school supplies, small rewards, or stipends to assist homeless students in acquiring essential resources that support their education. Additionally, certificates of participation

or letters of recommendation can acknowledge their valuable contributions and strengthen their academic portfolios. By offering such incentives, adult evaluators demonstrate their commitment to inclusivity, equity, and ensuring that homeless students are not excluded from research opportunities.

Creating a Safe and Inclusive Space
An evaluation process that provides a safe and inclusive space is vital for homeless students to share their perspectives openly and honestly. Foster an environment that encourages open dialogue, free from judgment or stigma. Establish clear guidelines for respectful communication and actively address any biases or stereotypes that may arise.

Building Positive Relationships
Developing and maintaining positive relationships between students and adults is essential in student–adult partnerships. Foster an environment of mutual respect, acknowledging the expertise that both students and adults bring to the table. Involving a trusted facilitator, whether a student or an adult, to oversee and monitor the process as needed is beneficial. The facilitator can support student engagement in research and help navigate any conflicts that may arise. Clear, transparent, and safe lines of communication should be constructed to ensure that thoughts, ideas, and questions can be freely shared by both students and adults.

Providing Training and Support
To effectively engage homeless students as evaluators, comprehensive training and support are crucial. Guidance on feedback, data analysis, and communication should be provided. Mentorship and peer support programs play a vital role in fostering confidence and ensuring that the voices of homeless students are heard. Tailored professional learning opportunities enhance their research skills, encompassing an understanding of research purposes, methodologies, and data types. Ethics education reinforces principles such as consent and confidentiality. Through professional learning, homeless students can effectively translate their experiences into future prospects, showcasing their skills, critical thinking, and real-world involvement when pursuing education or work. This empowers them and positions them for success.

Removing Barriers and Ensuring Accessibility
Addressing and removing barriers is necessary to enable the meaningful participation of homeless students as evaluators. Creating an inclusive and equitable environment that values the unique contributions of homeless students is essential. By removing barriers, evaluators demonstrate their commitment to accessibility and empower homeless students. This approach ensures that their voices are heard, fostering a sense of belonging and agency in the research process.

Maintaining Confidentiality
Respecting the privacy and confidentiality of homeless student evaluators is paramount. Protecting their identities and personal information throughout the evaluation process is crucial. Procedures and protocols should be established to handle sensitive data and maintain confidentiality when discussing evaluation findings or sharing student perspectives.

Fostering Meaningful Engagement: Involvement in All Stages

Promoting meaningful engagement involves involving homeless student evaluators in all stages of the evaluation process. This includes planning, data collection, analysis, and decision-making. Seeking their input on evaluation tools, survey questions, and methods ensures that their perspectives are adequately represented and respected. Their firsthand experiences offer unique knowledge and expertise that may be inaccessible to adults alone.

Employing a Variety of Data Collection Methods

Capturing the diverse experiences and insights of homeless student evaluators requires employing a variety of data collection methods. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and observations should be utilized to gain a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and provide a holistic view of the impact of student voice initiatives. Surveys can be co-developed with students to understand various aspects such as school climate, well-being, engagement, or mental health. Interviews or focus group protocols can be designed in collaboration with students, empowering them to facilitate discussions. Observations in different contexts, as well as photo voice protocols, can provide deeper insights.

Summarizing and Presenting Research Findings

The stage of summarizing and presenting research findings is an important opportunity for students to reflect on and share their experiences. The final product should clearly acknowledge the specific role(s) and contribution(s) that adults and students provided. Giving students the opportunity to individually and collectively comment on the product ensures that their voices and experiences are accurately captured.

Involvement in Data Analysis and Reflection

Homeless students should have the opportunity to be involved in all stages of the analytical process, including analyzing and interpreting the collected data. Involving students in data analysis is crucial to ensure that nuances in their experiences are captured and retained. When considering the specific roles of students and adults in data analysis, permissions and access to data need to be taken into account. Students should be given the opportunity to review findings and ensure that interpretations reflect their experiences. Embedding a reflection period for students and adults to discuss their data analysis experiences is beneficial.

Regularly Seeking Feedback

Regularly seeking feedback from homeless student evaluators regarding their experiences in the evaluation process is important. Creating opportunities for them to express concerns, suggest improvements, or provide input on how to better support their involvement is key. Actively listening to their feedback and making necessary adjustments ensures their continued engagement and participation in the evaluation process.

Recognizing and Celebrating Contributions

Acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of homeless student evaluators is vital. Recognize the expertise, insights, and unique perspectives that they bring to the evaluation process. Showcasing their work through presentations, reports, or recognition ceremonies honors their contributions and inspires other students to participate.

Translating Findings into Action

Ensure that evaluation findings translate into tangible actions and improvements within the school community. Use the insights gained from homeless student evaluators to inform decision-making processes, shape policies, and drive positive change. Share evaluation results with relevant stakeholders to promote transparency and accountability. Support students in taking action based on research findings. Mentor students in considering how research can inform practice and spark change. Empower their knowledge and leadership, and encourage them to continue conducting research on issues in their communities, using their findings to facilitate change.

STUDENT INVOLVED EVALUATION *Examples*
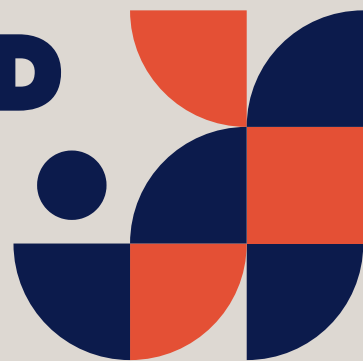
Student voice initiatives have been making waves in the education landscape, recognized for their potential to empower students and shape educational policies and practices. But to truly ensure inclusivity and authenticity, it's essential to embrace diverse perspectives, including those of homeless K-12 students. Their voices are not only valuable but also vital in driving transformative outcomes.

Here are examples that highlight the significant impact of involving homeless students as evaluators in suburban, rural, and urban school communities.

Example 1: Suburban School Community

In a suburban school district grappling with an increase in homelessness rates, a student-led evaluation project was initiated to gather feedback and insights from homeless students. The project aimed to understand the challenges faced by homeless students and identify areas for improvement within the district's support systems. Homeless students were trained as evaluators and actively engaged in data collection, interviews, and focus groups. Their firsthand experiences brought to light critical issues, such as inadequate access to resources, housing instability's impact on academic performance, and the need for targeted emotional support. The evaluation findings informed policy changes, leading to increased funding for homeless student support programs, the establishment of a dedicated liaison for homeless students, and enhanced communication channels to address their unique needs.

Example 2: Rural School Community

In a rural community with limited resources, a school district embarked on a student voice project that specifically aimed to amplify the voices of homeless students. Homeless students were involved as evaluators in assessing the effectiveness of existing support initiatives and identifying gaps. The students were provided with training and support to actively participate in surveys and focus groups. Their involvement sparked meaningful discussions, shedding light on the impact of housing instability on mental health, transportation challenges, and the need for mentorship programs. The evaluation process not only provided valuable insights but also empowered homeless students to take on leadership roles. Their recommendations led to the implementation of a peer mentorship program, increased collaboration with community organizations to address transportation barriers, and the development of mental health resources tailored to the needs of homeless students.

Example 3: Urban School Community

In a suburban school district grappling with an increase in homelessness rates, a student-led evaluation project was initiated to gather feedback and insights from homeless students. The project aimed to understand the challenges faced by homeless students and identify areas for improvement within the district's support systems. Homeless students were trained as evaluators and actively engaged in data collection, interviews, and focus groups. Their firsthand experiences brought to light critical issues, such as inadequate access to resources, housing instability's impact on academic performance, and the need for targeted emotional support. The evaluation findings informed policy changes, leading to increased funding for homeless student support programs, the establishment of a dedicated liaison for homeless students, and enhanced communication channels to address their unique needs.

EVALUATION WITH HOMELESS STUDENTS
Safety & Wellbeing

When it comes to partnering with students for research, careful planning is essential to ensure their safety and well-being. Employing a range of ethical research practices is crucial to create a supportive environment. Before involving students as evaluators, it's important to familiarize yourself with the policies and guidelines set by the school, district, and state regarding research. Understanding safety concerns is paramount as it helps minimize risks not only for students but also for adults and the community as a whole. Striking a balance between safeguarding students and reaping the benefits of their valuable participation is the key to conducting ethical research.

Taking a Trauma-Informed Care Approach
It's crucial to approach research with sensitivity, particularly when working with vulnerable populations such as homeless students. Adopting a trauma-informed care approach ensures that the research process recognizes the potential trauma and adverse experiences that students may have faced. Creating a safe and supportive environment that considers their emotional well-being is vital. This includes fostering open communication, establishing trust, and providing opportunities for students to share their experiences in a way that feels comfortable and empowering to them. Trauma-informed care principles guide researchers in promoting healing, resilience, and positive outcomes for students throughout the research journey.

Sensitivity to Students' Unique Experiences
Homeless students may have encountered numerous challenges and hardships that influence their perspectives and participation in research. It is crucial to approach their experiences with sensitivity and empathy. Researchers should take the time to listen actively, demonstrating genuine care and interest in understanding their unique circumstances. By acknowledging and validating their experiences, researchers can create a safe space where students feel heard, valued, and respected. Sensitivity also involves considering potential triggers or emotional responses that may arise during the research process and taking appropriate measures to support students in managing and processing their feelings.

Collaboration with School Social Workers and Supportive Professionals
Engaging with school social workers and supportive professionals who work closely with homeless students can provide valuable insights and guidance when conducting research. Collaborating with these experts ensures that the research process aligns with trauma-informed care principles and promotes the well-being of students. Social workers can offer recommendations for creating a safe and supportive environment, provide strategies to

address potential emotional challenges and assist in developing appropriate protocols for data collection and handling. By working together, adult evaluators and student support staff can provide holistic support to students, fostering their resilience and protecting their overall well-being.

Empowering Homeless Students as Evaluators

By following these considerations and incorporating trauma-informed care approaches, researchers can effectively engage and empower homeless students as evaluators. This inclusive and sensitive approach ensures that their voices are not only heard but also valued, and their perspectives become integral to the evaluation process. By placing an emphasis on equity, inclusivity, and meaningful student participation, researchers can drive positive change in education, benefiting not only the students themselves but also the broader educational community. Together, we can create a research environment that uplifts and empowers every student, providing them with the support they need to thrive.

RESOURCES
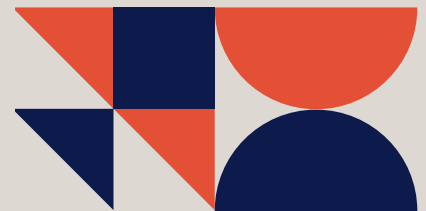
"Student Voice: The Instrument of Change" by Russell J. Quaglia and Michael J. Corso: This book explores the concept of student voice and its transformative potential in educational settings. It discusses the importance of student involvement in decision-making and offers strategies for incorporating student voice into evaluation processes.

"Youth Engagement in Research and Evaluation: A Guide for Youth-Serving Organizations." Provides an understanding of how developmental science can inform effective youth-engaged research and evaluation as well as practical tools to evaluate youth-engaged research strategies and examples of programs and resources to ensure Youth Participatory Action Research is done right.

"Youth Involvement in Evaluation and Research." Harvard Family Research Project, February, 2002. A culmination of information collected in the year 2000 with representatives of 15 programs1 that are involving youth in their evaluation and research efforts.

"Youth Participatory Evaluation." The ACT (Assets Coming Together) for Youth Center for Community Action connects research to practice in the areas of positive youth development and adolescent/young adult health through Cornell University.

"Youth Participatory Evaluation: Practice Guide." Wilder Research and YLI worked together to create this guide for youth participatory evaluation (YPE). YPE is an approach that engages young people in evaluating the programs, organizations, and systems designed to serve them.