

Five Steps Ahead

A Fellow Researcher's Take on Tierney and Hallett's New Chapter

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[Willam Tierney](#) and [Ronald Hallett](#)'s chapter entitled, "[Homeless Youth and Educational Policy: A Case Study of Urban Youth in a Metropolitan Area](#)" provides a much-needed contribution to the field of research and practice relating to the service of students who experience homelessness. As a scholar whose interests lie in the same area, I am always eager to read what others are learning about this burgeoning group of kids. Five specific aspects of the Tierney and Hallett chapter stood out to me.

First, the authors made an important observation that the homeless label, while providing baseline utility in establishing certain student rights and opportunities, is a broad one that encapsulates a diverse group of students, backgrounds, and experiences. In order for our field to address students' needs more appropriately amid context of homelessness, we need more fine-grained understandings of what these experiences are like. This chapter points us in that direction.

Second, and closely related, Tierney and Hallett focus upon one of the fastest growing and least understood subgroups of the larger population of homeless students—high school aged youth. All circumstances of homelessness are critical ones, but instances that occur during the high school years can be especially treacherous given some of the issues that the authors identify, including stigmatism, detachment from supportive relationships, and, broadly speaking, social and emotional trauma that may be less evident among homeless students at earlier developmental stages. We need more work that is directed toward adolescent youth who are highly mobile and this chapter provides such a nudge.

Third, toward a clearer understanding of the different subpopulations of homeless students, the authors provide a very useful "typology of homeless youth." They note that merely identifying a student as homeless is not enough—that we need to understand the particularities of their situations. These particularities are animated by specific developmental, relational, and organizational attributes that need to be examined empirically in the education field. Tierney and Hallett's typology is a useful tool in beginning this inquiry.

Fourth, this chapter highlights the critical intersection of policy, student/family conditions, and school design in the engagement of homelessness. The McKinney Vento Homeless Assistance Act is the foundational policy that articulates who is to be considered homeless and how they are to be served, so to the extent that this chapter furthers researcher and practitioner awareness of the policy and the complexities associated with its implementation, it provides significant utility. While it is unclear whether the authors' specific school design-related recommendations are fiscally or politically tenable (such as the creation of separate school spaces for students who are identified as homeless), the thoughtfulness and ecological awareness that undergird these recommendations are indeed admirable.

Finally, I find it extremely encouraging that Tierney, the president of the American Educational Research Association and a highly visible and influential scholar in the broader field of education, is taking a leadership role in shaping an agenda for research and action in service of this most at risk population of students. Tierney can choose to leverage his considerable intellectual, political, and social capital in a wide range of conceptual agendas, but his choice to become immersed in this particular issue at this particular time is quite meaningful, not only because his work with Hallett—another hard charging, productive researcher—will deepen our empirical understandings about how to serve homeless students, but because of the symbolic importance associated with his work here. Simply put, Tierney’s value for the issue will create ripple effects in the field of research beyond this particular project—and I see that as a very good thing.

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