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The Impact of Childhood Homelessness in Aotearoa's Education Spaces: Educators' Ever-Expanding Roles with Children and Whānau

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Abstract

The Aotearoa New Zealand (Aotearoa) education system is the only agency, governmental or otherwise, that children aged 6–16 years and their whānau (families) must engage with. The 2023 Aotearoa census found that 319 of every 10,000 children under the age of 15 years were living with severe housing deprivation (homelessness). Therefore, it is likely that educators in primary and intermediate schools are working with children and their whānau who are experiencing homelessness. However, little is known about the broader impact on educators of working with children and their whānau who are experiencing homelessness, or about educator observations on the effects of homelessness on children in educational spaces in Aotearoa. Furthermore, there are no currently agreed policies or practice guidelines for educational sites and educators to refer to when supporting children and whānau experiencing homelessness.

This thesis reports on research conducted with educators in Aotearoa regarding their experiences of and perspectives on working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Fifteen educators from schools across Aotearoa, who worked with children aged 5 to 13 years, were recruited and interviewed. The educator participants were all currently employed in schools, and most were registered teachers. The majority held leadership roles (principal or deputy principal) or were learning support coordinators (LSCs); others occupied classroom teaching and non-teaching support positions within their school. Interviews were conducted via zoom and transcribed. Data was analysed using thematic analysis and narrative analysis, and organised using ecological systems theory (EST), (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An adapted model of EST, Educator Ecological Systems, was developed through the analysis phase, and used to structure the discussion.

This research contributes new knowledge about the expansive roles that educators in Aotearoa play in supporting children and whānau experiencing homelessness. It provides insight into the approaches that different educational sites use to promote positive relationships and engagement in the school community and learning programmes, as well as what they have found effective.

When educators shared common experiences with children and whānau, this appeared to play a role in the establishment of positive, trusted relationships. However, even in the absence of these shared experiences, educators' efforts to understand what was happening in the lives of children and whānau could also contribute to building relationships.

Educators asserted that holistic support was necessary, which stretched their typical educational role. They described the need to understand, consider, and address physical, social, and mental-emotional well-being when working with children experiencing homelessness. Specifically, the educators shared that, unless there was a focus on "Hauora" (an Indigenous Māori language term for holistic well-being) when working with children impacted by homelessness, it was difficult for children to focus on or make progress in their academic learning.

A key finding in this research was that strong relationships were particularly critical for children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Trust was described as a fundamental foundation for developing positive relationships and fostering engagement. Consistency in the educational site itself and in the people working with children and whānau, was described as an essential part of building trusted and productive relationships. A key component of creating consistency was the designation of a primary contact person for whānau to engage with. Identifying the "right" primary contact depended on a myriad of factors, including interactions and availability. Sustained positive relationships were also found to provide stability for impacted children and whānau and were identified as having the power to break down stigma.

Creating a culture of care to facilitate a sense of belonging was identified as vital to supporting children and whānau. The educators shared that using trauma-informed approaches in the classroom and the wider school environment could be effective in helping children navigate the stress associated with homelessness.

Belongingness was also recognised as a protective factor for children and whānau; this included the presence of a consistent support network and the ability to remain in the same area when experiencing homelessness. However, educators described that children impacted by homelessness often appeared to lose their sense of belonging when they had to move out of the area where they were established. This was identified as a cause of distress among children and whānau as they needed to engage in new educational spaces. Furthermore, entering a tight-knit or smaller community appeared to contribute to children and whānau experiencing a sense of othering due to the community's knowledge of emergency and transitional housing locations.

This research found that clear and focused communication was an integral part of understanding the current needs and previous experiences of children and whānau impacted by homelessness. Communication was identified as essential to ensuring that educators and key staff members were equipped with the necessary information to work

effectively and responsively as they taught and supported children and whānau. Furthermore, creating and maintaining open communication channels allowed whānau to share their needs and express their concerns with the schools their children attended. Communication between schools and whānau, between educators within the school, between educators and their learners, and between schools and support organisations was identified by the educators as an essential component of meeting the well-being and academic needs of children and whānau.

Progress towards and achievement of learning outcomes has been identified by the participating educators as particularly challenging for children experiencing homelessness. Educators discussed perceived gaps and barriers within the education system that impact their work, interactions with whānau, and children's achievement outcomes.

Many educators described how they or their school had to step in to provide support and resources that they believed should have been provided by other government sectors. They explained that educational sites and educators in Aotearoa were involved in providing housing, social development, and health and disability supports. The participants shared experiences in which they also took on social advocacy roles by providing food and resources, and they worked to build connections with support services on behalf of and with whānau.

This research found that educators are undertaking roles that extend beyond the academic and social–emotional aspects of classroom activities and school community. Evidence gathered in this research enabled the development of recommendations for the education sector and other sectors in Aotearoa to better meet the needs of these children and their whānau. These include building knowledge of the scope and impact of homelessness into teacher education and professional development; increasing knowledge of the impact of trauma, trauma-related behaviours, and trauma-informed pedagogy in teacher education and professional development; creating resources to support the purposeful creation of a Culture of Care in schools; developing resources regarding working with whānau and children experiencing homelessness; establishing a robust support network that emphasises the importance of communication pathways within and between schools, agencies, and organisations; and developing agency and organisation systems and government policy focused on prioritising safe, affordable, and long-term housing in school zones.

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Glossary

hauora – holistic well-being

kete – basket

kohatu – rock

mana – spiritual power, charisma

mātauranga – knowledge

mauri – life force

mauri tau – to be serene, without panic

piki ake – uplift

takahi – trample, stamp

tamaiti – child (singular)

tamariki – children (plural)

tau – settled

Te Tiriti o Waitangi – the treaty of Waitangi

tūrangawaewae – a place to belong

whakamana – empower

whakapapa – lineage

whakawhanaungatanga – establishing relationships

whānau – family

whāriki – mat

1 Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Childhood Homelessness and Education in Aotearoa

Homelessness is frequently used as a singular term in social and media contexts internationally. The term often evokes, or is used in conjunction with, images of unwashed people sleeping on the streets under lean-to structures made out of items that have been discarded. In Aotearoa New Zealand (referred to as Aotearoa in this research), this “on the street” experience encapsulates the prominent perception of homelessness; however, the media also depicts families (referred to as whānau in this research) with young children in cramped motel rooms that are being used for emergency housing. Ultimately, the reality of homelessness cannot be captured in a single description or image.

There are several ways people can experience homelessness, including “rough sleeping” on the street, “couch surfing” while staying with friends and/or whānau for a short period of time, and staying in transitional or emergency housing — often while seeking a more permanent tenancy. In Aotearoa, the official definition of homelessness is “living situations where people with no other options to acquire safe and secure housing are without shelter, in temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation with a household or living in uninhabitable housing” (Statistics NZ, 2015). This research uses the term homelessness to refer to the range of living situations identified by the Aotearoa government as severe housing deprivation (Statistics NZ, 2015).

The issue of homelessness is an important one in Aotearoa society right now (Amore et al., 2021; Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2019; NZ Parliament, 2020; Statistics NZ, 2024). Pertinent to this study, whānau with school-aged children experience some of the highest rates of severe housing deprivation in Aotearoa. The actual number is likely to be higher than the approximately 350,000 identified in the most recent census (Statistics NZ, 2024), as children are often part of the hidden homeless population (Crawley et al., 2013; Hallet, 2011; Pehi et al., 2025).

As enrolment in education programmes is compulsory between the ages of 6 and 16 years, educators in Aotearoa schools are on the front lines of working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Within school zones are facilities, including

motels and hostels, that government and non-government agencies use as emergency and transitional housing. As a result, these schools have enrolled students who are experiencing homelessness. However, emergency and transitional housing facilities are not the only form of homelessness. Regardless of the region, all schools may have whānau living in cars, doubled up in overcrowded homes, or living in homes or other structures that are not safe for sustained inhabitation (Amore et al., 2021; Statistics NZ, 2024). Educators — from classroom teachers to senior leadership — and school support staff (including school administration, learning support assistants, and librarians) regularly work with children and interact with whānau experiencing homelessness. Despite the issue of homelessness and the large number of homeless children being acknowledged in the New Zealand Government's agency papers and policies (Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, 2020; Statistics NZ, 2024), there is no official education policy or resource related to working with homeless children and whānau for schools and educators to access and apply in their work (Ministry of Education, 2025). Nor does there appear to be any mandated professional development or component of initial educator education programmes regarding either the types of living arrangements considered to be forms of homelessness or the impact of experiencing homelessness in childhood. This means that schools and educators must manage the needs of homeless children in their classrooms and school communities daily and effectively engage with these children's whānau without any clear guidelines to structure their responses. Furthermore, the scope of the work they are doing to support the children and their whānau is not immediately visible to the system within which they work and to whom they report.

There are some studies from the United States of America (USA) about educators' perspectives on working with homeless children and youth (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002; Smart, 2018; Ukoha, 2021). However, the USA has a federal policy, the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which specifically addresses homelessness and aims to mitigate its impact on educational access, engagement, and achievement (National Center for Homeless Education, 2025). This act has been used to increase knowledge, guide approaches, and measure adherence regarding the work that schools and educators undertake with students experiencing homelessness (Hallett & Skrla, 2021). I could not locate any studies conducted in Aotearoa that focus on educators' perspectives on the impact of childhood homelessness in schools and on their work.

It is imperative, given the increasing number of children experiencing homelessness in Aotearoa (Statistics NZ, 2024) and the reality that educators are likely

to spend more time than any other agency or organisation working with the children and whānau, that this area is studied. I believe that focusing on educators' perspectives in these settings provides important evidence to address this research gap. The information and insights that can be gained by filling this gap can inform support systems for educators and schools to use and access when working with children and whānau affected by homelessness.

1.2 My Background and Motivation

I am many things: a wife, a mother, a big sister, a daughter, an auntie, and, in my professional life, an educator. My husband and I had our children at a young age. Our experiences as young parents have played a significant role in shaping the person I am today and the passions I continue to pursue in my professional life. Alongside these parenting experiences, my childhood experiences eventually led me to become an education support worker for the Ministry of Education in early childhood education (ECE) centres. I then became a learning support assistant and a teaching assistant at the school my children attended. I spent time getting to know children from many cultures and many socioeconomic backgrounds to ensure that I could effectively meet their needs. I spoke to parents who shared their fears and hopes for their children who did not neatly fit into the boxes of "should" when it came to developmental milestones, behaviour, or socio-emotional understanding.

It was my work with these children, their parents, and their ECE or primary educators that sparked my interest in completing my degree and then undertaking my Graduate Diploma of Teaching. I began my teaching career as a relief educator, as I still had my own whānau as my primary focus. I explored professional development opportunities that helped me better understand how to support learners in my care in the classroom by focusing on emotional regulation, resilience, positive communication skills, and the promotion of self-belief. This eventually led to me completing my master's degree. I studied and worked full-time, focusing on strategies and tools (which were driven by a trauma-informed lens) to support children's development of increased resilience and positive attitudes, as well as their progress in learning and achievement..

I began to see, through both my professional practice and my ongoing professional development, that there were commonalities among the children with the lowest self-belief or the most challenging behaviours in the classroom. I also started to realise that one of the reasons I recognised these commonalities and the thought patterns/attitudes

shared or expressed by some of my students was that they resonated with my own school experiences. I realised that I was trying, in every way I knew (or could learn), to be the educator I needed when I was that student. I learnt about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the existing studies and literature (Felitti et al., 1998). I always felt passionately about making sure the children I worked with knew I was there to support and care for them as they undertook the difficult task of learning, both academically and socio-emotionally; this passion then crystallised into a desire to understand ACEs and their impact. I subsequently sought to utilise my new knowledge and become involved in developing awareness, tools, strategies, and programmes that could mitigate the harm ACEs cause to children.

This work led to my own consideration of homelessness in the broader context of Aotearoa, especially as I was coming across multiple children in each of my yearly classes who had experienced homelessness. My own experiences with homelessness as both a child and a parent, as well as the ever-increasing coverage of the "NZ Housing Crisis" that mentioned children being affected, clarified for me that educators' work with children and whānau experiencing homelessness was a missing part of the overall story. This focus was motivated by my experiences in the classroom, working with and listening to children who were experiencing homelessness.

Due to my husband's involvement with several non-government housing providers, I witnessed firsthand the coordinated response of multiple government and non-government agencies in Auckland and Hamilton as they worked to find housing for people in need towards the end of March 2020 as Aotearoa responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with a Level 4 lockdown. The conversations I had with people from some of these housing providers highlighted an issue regarding the unknown number of children affected by homelessness. Adults were entering the system to receive housing support, but in the process of identifying a "best fit" for each person, it was determined that a single-bed unit or shared accommodation would not be appropriate as the person had one or more dependent children. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and highlighted homelessness, and, alongside general conversations with people working in the housing sector and my colleagues in school, it brought to the fore for me the broad scope of work needed in the area of homelessness. This, combined with my experiences as an educator, helped me narrow the focus for my work. I believe that foregrounding educators' experiences of working with children who live with homelessness can foster new knowledge about the intersection of child and family homelessness and educators' work.

1.3 Research Problem and Purpose

The academic literature shows that the outcomes for children who experience ACEs, including homelessness, are negatively impacted as they enter adulthood (Anda et al., 2006; Asmundson & Afifi, 2019; Chapman et al., 2004; Finkelhor et al., 2015). My analysis of the literature identified a gap in understandings of educators' potential impact on children and their whānau who experience homelessness. This study addresses this gap.

Strategic proposals from the New Zealand Government's Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MHUD, 2019) indicate that addressing homelessness is a priority. These proposals emphasise shortening the period of homelessness for individuals and whānau and increasing available housing and support programmes to prevent homelessness through sustained tenancy. While these proposed steps are essential, they do not specifically address the impact of homelessness on educational spaces or the needs of children in the homeless population. Furthermore, they do not currently address how homelessness affects children's ability to attend school, meet educational achievement outcomes, and successfully navigate the education system. Finally, they do not acknowledge the significant role educators can play in the lives of children and whānau experiencing homelessness.

There is currently a gap in the explicit, focused research that supports an understanding of educators' experiences working with children and whānau who are impacted by homelessness. Consequently, this knowledge is largely absent from conversations about whānau and childhood homelessness in Aotearoa. The information and insights gained by filling this gap through educator perspectives and experiences can inform and further initiate the creation of support systems for children affected by homelessness, along with their whānau and the educators working with them.

1.3.1 Research Questions

The following two questions have guided my research:

1. What are educators' experiences of supporting and working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness?
2. Who and what are educators interacting with in their work to support children and whānau impacted by homelessness?

This research was conducted through one-off Zoom interviews with educators to gather their experiences and perspectives. I worked within a constructivist paradigm, using narrative inquiry to guide semi-structured conversations to collect data. Thematic and narrative analysis were used to analyse the data. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST) was used to organise the findings. A reflexive approach was adopted as part of analysing and presenting the findings.

1.4 Roadmap for the Thesis

In Chapter 1, I have outlined the issue being researched and the knowledge that is being gained through this study. I have identified the purpose of the research, the background of the issue, my background and motivations, and the overarching research questions.

In Chapter 2, the literature review begins by situating the thesis within the wider contexts of homelessness and education, both internationally and in Aotearoa. Specifically, I start by establishing the scope of homelessness and those affected; I outline the definitions used and explore the current literature on the growing number of whānau with young children experiencing homelessness. I then focus on the wider purpose of education in Western international contexts and in Aotearoa, followed by the potential impacts of an educator's personal experiences, cultural and ethnic heritages, and values and beliefs, all of which guide their approach to teaching. Next, I highlight the role of engagement in the educational spaces (i.e., schools) in children's lives through an exploration of the literature on educator–student relationships, belongingness, and hauora (holistic well-being) within the learning environment. I also consider the role of educators in engaging with social support systems to access and provide resources, as well as the efforts by social workers in schools (SWiS) to facilitate engagement between educators and whānau. I then move on to outline current research on the impact of childhood homelessness on education. In particular, I highlight the limited research carried out in Aotearoa that studies the effects of childhood homelessness on the roles and responsibilities of educators, as well as children's lived experiences of homelessness while engaging with the education system. Studies involving educator perspectives on childhood homelessness are unpacked. I also note that understandings of childhood homelessness and measures to support educators, children, and whānau have not been incorporated into the New Zealand Government's educational policy, and I identify gaps in the current knowledge and literature that this research has addressed.

Chapter 3 outlines how this study was undertaken and the steps required to achieve its purpose. I begin by explaining the study's location within the constructivist paradigm, before discussing narrative inquiry and its significance to this research, particularly in terms of understanding the experiences of both an individual and the people they engage with through the stories they share. I discuss my positionality as a researcher within the context of my lived experience and membership of the wider professional group of participants. I then explain the recruitment and data collection strategies and introduce the participants. Following this, I discuss the use of thematic analysis (TA) and narrative analysis (NA), alongside Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST), to interpret the dataset and structure the findings. I also outline the use of TA and NA to develop small stories as illustrators of nuance and interconnection within and between themes. Lastly, I discuss the ethical considerations for this research and its trustworthiness in relation to the design, implementation, reporting, and discussion of the findings.

Chapter 4 presents the findings of the educator interviews. This chapter is organised into the key themes that emerged from my analysis of the educators' data. I begin with the importance of relationships — the role of consistency and trust and the importance of ensuring that the relationships prioritise the agency of the child and whānau. I then outline the role that educators and schools play in supporting the physical, social, and mental and emotional well-being of children and whānau. This theme includes educators' belief that hauora is necessary to ensure that a child can attend school and that learning can happen. The next theme is communication, followed by the significant difference that the role of a primary contact person can have on positive engagement with a child and their whānau, especially regarding the preservation of the dignity of the individuals. I further discuss the impact of stability — or the lack thereof — in both the home and the school; the importance of belongingness; social stigma as a factor impacting when and how a child or whānau will reach out for, or accept, help; and the role of an educator's own childhood lived experiences with adversity — whether homelessness or another form, such as extreme poverty or abuse — in creating strong reciprocal relationships that facilitate support for the whānau. The educators further spoke about the pressure they feel from performing actions and playing roles that pick up the slack from other systems and organisations, including housing, the Ministry of Social Development, Health and Disability, and the education system. I round out this chapter by sharing the educators' perspectives on working within the education system, including the need to show academic progress, the reality of academic progress becoming secondary to meeting their students' needs, the need to prioritise creating conditions in learning spaces that can

support academic learning, and the complications of encountering resistance to engagement from children and their whānau. Each theme is supported with educators' experiences in the form of small stories and direct quotes to illustrate the perspectives being shared.

Chapter 5 outlines the contribution this study has made. I discuss the research by first focusing on areas where the findings align with international studies on the impact of childhood homelessness in educational settings. I then identify the new knowledge this study has contributed to broader understandings of the impact of childhood homelessness on educational spaces and educators' work in Aotearoa. This knowledge evolved using an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST model, developed during data analysis, in which educators were located at the centre. The model highlights the expansive role that educators played in supporting children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Drawing on international studies, I elaborate on the role of an educator's lived experience on their practice and interactions in the learning space. I also reflect on the importance of relationships, consistency, and the presence of a primary contact person for children and whānau in educational spaces, including the impact this can have on empowering children and whānau. Belongingness and the use of trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice are raised as key aspects for supporting children experiencing homelessness, as well as the protective and potentially detrimental impacts of community belongingness or a lack thereof. Furthermore, I highlight the educators' identification of what they perceived as gaps in support from government systems regarding meeting the needs of children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Following on from this, I discuss the relevance of educators' experiences and perspectives as a contributing component of solutions for the issues surrounding childhood homelessness. I provide recommendations for teacher education and professional development regarding homelessness and trauma-informed practice, development of government policies and resources to support educators and schools meet the needs of children experiencing homelessness, creation of multi-disciplinary teams across sectors and organisations to create consistent approaches to wrap-around support, and the need to prioritise safe affordable housing in school zones. Finally, I identify possible areas and focuses for further studies to continue expanding the work initiated by this research.

2 Chapter 2

Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the literature on homelessness and the education sector, including the work educators undertake and the factors they consider to both understand and mitigate the impact of childhood homelessness in educational spaces and on academic outcomes. I start by discussing homelessness broadly, particularly its definitions and representations, as it is important to contextualise this experience within Aotearoa. The chapter then focuses on whānau homelessness, the effect that whānau stress has on primary school children, and the status of homelessness as an adverse childhood experience (ACE). I discuss the purpose of education, the role of educators, and the impact that an educator's personal, non-teaching experiences and social and cultural identities/affiliations can have in educational spaces. I then turn my attention to the relationship between education and trusted educator–student interactions before considering the literature on the protective value of fostering a sense of belonging in educational spaces and the role of education in promoting hauora (holistic well-being). I also explore the interactions among the education system, educators, and other support agencies and organisations, as well as previous studies on the role and impact of both communication systems and social workers in supporting and addressing the needs of children and whānau. I then examine the existing literature on the impact of homelessness on learning and educational experiences, focusing on the known issues educators face regarding attendance, participation, and academic outcomes. This chapter concludes by identifying the knowledge gap this study sought to address, the study's rationale, and the research questions for this thesis.

2.2 Homelessness

While many countries have a definition of homelessness that they use in their national conversations and policies, there is no internationally agreed-upon definition (Amore et al., 2011; United Nations, 2020). To address this, the United Nations (2020) offers a working definition of homelessness as "a condition where a person or household lacks habitable space with security of tenure, rights and ability to enjoy social relations,

including safety" (para. 16). In Europe, the European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless (FEANTSA) created the European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion (ETHOS), which describes types of homelessness as arising from circumstances that could affect any vulnerable individual or whānau unit: "(1) rooflessness (sleeping rough); (2) houselessness (temporary shelter); (3) insecure housing (the threat of insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence); and (4) inadequate housing (unfit or overcrowded housing)" (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017, p. 102). This categorisation is similar to that used in the USA (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2025b) and the United Kingdom (Government Analysis Function, 2025; Shelter, 2025).

Also in the USA, Lee et al. (2010) categorised homelessness into three types based on a temporal dimension. The first of these is transitional, where the period of homelessness is brief and typically a one-time experience. The second category is episodic, in which people go through cycles of being in housing and being homeless. The final category is chronic, where people are consistently homeless without a settled period of stable housing at any point once they become homeless (Lee et al., 2010). Chronic homelessness is typically defined as being in these circumstances for at least 12 months, and this definition is often important as it can determine eligibility for housing support systems (US Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2025a). These three types of homelessness may occur across a wide range of settings, such as sleeping in their car, house hopping with whānau between the homes of relatives, moving through a series of low-cost hotel rooms or short-term housing due to an inability to secure a stable tenancy, or being in transitional or emergency housing. Any of these examples could fit into each of the three categories. Some of these settings, particularly living with friends and whānau when someone has nowhere else to live, can also be described as "hidden homelessness" (Harter et al., 2005; Moulton, 2019). The hidden homeless are people who live without a permanent abode, but who are not engaged with any organisation that identifies them as such. The hidden homeless can include people living out of their cars, people who live in temporary caravans/tents on the property of whānau or friends, or those who "couch surf" and stay a few nights at different friends' houses before moving on to the next place, with an occasional stay in a hostel in between. Ultimately, the hidden homeless are the members of the homeless population who are difficult to identify and who often, though not always, experience episodic homelessness, moving between low-cost short-term housing or living in the (now overcrowded) primary residence of their extended whānau or friends (Harter et al., 2005; Moulton, 2019). Viewed across this range, homelessness

thus "forms a continuum not easily dichotomized into homeless and non-homeless segments" (Lee et al., 2010, p. 503).

In Aotearoa, the official definition of homelessness draws heavily on the ETHOS conceptual model developed by FEANTSA, with adaptations and modifications being made to meet the specific needs of the local context (Edgar, 2012). Homelessness is defined as "living situations where people with no other options to acquire safe and secure housing; are without shelter, in temporary accommodation, sharing accommodation with a household or living in uninhabitable housing" (Statistics NZ, 2015). This is further clarified by Statistics NZ (2015) to explain the terminology:

- Without shelter: No shelter or makeshift shelter. Examples include living on the street and inhabiting improvised dwellings, such as shacks or cars.
- Temporary accommodation: Overnight shelter or 24-hour accommodation in a non- private dwelling not intended for long-term living. These include hostels for the homeless, transitional supported accommodation for the homeless, and women's refuges. Also in this category are people staying long-term in motor camps and boarding houses.
- Sharing accommodation: Temporary accommodation for people through sharing someone else's private dwelling. The usual residents of the dwelling are not considered homeless.
- Uninhabitable housing: Dilapidated dwellings where people reside. (Paragraph 2)

The Statistics NZ (2015) definition, as presented above, was used for this research and throughout the remainder of this literature review, as it is the context-specific definition still used in Aotearoa. Importantly, this definition includes those in emergency and transitional housing. In Aotearoa, emergency housing is provided by the Ministry of Social Development and managed through their public-facing agency Work and Income (Work and Income, 2025). There are several criteria that people must meet to be eligible for placement in emergency housing, including having "nowhere to stay tonight or in the next 7 nights" (Work and Income, 2025, para. 1), as well as a range of financial and citizenship thresholds. However, there are exceptions that can be made, including targeted options for people escaping domestic violence. Emergency housing is intended to be short-term and, for those who qualify, is paid for by the government for up to 7 nights at a time. The application information states that, after 7 nights, the person will be required to financially contribute to their stay (Work and Income, 2025). Transitional housing in

Aotearoa falls under the purview of the MHUD (2025a). However, a number of non-governmental organisations that provide transitional housing receive funding from government contracts through MHUD. Transitional housing is intended to be a temporary housing option for "individuals and whānau who don't have anywhere to live and urgently need a place to stay", with the added context that people in transitional housing are offered "tailored support to help these individuals and whānau into longer-term housing" (MHUD, 2025a, para. 1). Transitional housing is paid for by the individual/whānau, with the amount capped at 25% of their income (MHUD, 2025a).

There has been discussion in Aotearoa about the language used to discuss homelessness, including the need to ensure inclusive language in literature and reports and the choice by some researchers to refer to homelessness as "severe housing deprivation" (Amore et al., 2011). The media refers to the general issue of homelessness, attributed to a lack of affordable and adequate housing, as the "Housing Crisis" (Malva, 2016). However, some researchers believe that using "sanitised" names for homelessness, such as "housing deprivation," removes the human element from the conversation and causes the issue to become abstract and disconnected from those being affected (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017). Homelessness is also referred to in political discourse, research, and literature as "people's experience of homelessness" or "being vulnerably housed" (see Andermann et al., 2020; Cunningham & Slade, 2019; Meanwell, 2012; Om et al., 2022; Shum, 2022; Zufferey & Kerr, 2004). Due to the wide range of terminology between nations and in Aotearoa, this review and thesis use the term homelessness.

2.2.1 Prevalence of Homelessness in Aotearoa

The 2023 Census found that 2.3% of the Aotearoa population were experiencing homelessness (Statistics NZ, 2024). However, Statistics NZ (2024) acknowledges that over 350,000 people had a housing status that could not be determined.

Homelessness affects people from all areas of life: men, women, non-binary and gender non-conforming individuals, youths, children, neurodivergent individuals, neurotypical individuals, people suffering with mental illness and addiction issues, people affected by natural disasters, people impacted by domestic violence, and people struck by extreme poverty and debt (Aviles & Helfrich, 2006; Churchard et al., 2019; Holtrop et al., 2015; Nishio et al., 2017; Pehi et al., 2025). The homeless population is as diverse as the housed population, with Indigenous people often over-represented in homeless populations (Anderson & Collins, 2014).

In Aotearoa, there is a known over-representation of Indigenous Māori communities in all studies of homelessness (Amore et al., 2021; Pehi et al., 2025; Statistics NZ, 2024). Based on the 2023 census, 3.94% of Māori people who participated experienced homelessness (Statistics NZ, 2024). Approximately 6.6% of Indigenous people from one (or more) of the Pacific Nations were found by the 2023 census to be living in some form of homelessness (Statistics NZ, 2024). This over-representation of Indigenous Māori and Pacific peoples has identified the need for Indigenous-based solutions and frameworks (Lawson-Te Aho et al., 2019; MHUD, 2025).

Studies globally and in Aotearoa indicate that within the homeless population there is also an over-representation of youth who identify with one or more of the lesbian gay bi-sexual transgender queer and questioning intersex asexual (LGBTQIA+) communities (Aviles & Helfrich, 2006; Keuroghlian et al., 2014; Statistics NZ, 2024); neurodivergent youth, particularly those with autistic traits (Churchard et al., 2019); people with physical disabilities (Statistics NZ, 2024); people who are suffering from mental illness, including addiction (Nishio et al., 2017); young people who have previously been in state care; and people who have experienced instability, abuse, and trauma in their home lives as children (Aviles & Helfrich, 2006; Pehi et al., 2025 Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). Internationally, including Aotearoa, one of the fastest-growing segments of the homeless population is whānau, particularly female-led single-parent whānau with young children (Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Cross et al., 2022; Holtrop et al., 2015; Pehi et al., 2025), and children under the age of 15 have the highest rates of homelessness and make up "the highest proportion of people living in uninhabitable housing" (Statistics NZ, 2024).

2.3 Whānau Homelessness

Children under the age of 13 who experience homelessness generally do so while still in the care of their parents or caregivers. Research indicates that substance abuse, domestic abuse, mental health, debt, or changes to the whānau structure can all be causal factors in homelessness (Bender et al., 2018; Pehi et al., 2025). A whānau can also become homeless due to situations beyond their control. These include loss of a rental home through sale of the property, job loss, or income reduction impacting affordability of rental prices. Furthermore, pre-existing poverty, which exacerbates the impact of a natural disaster and therefore slows recovery, was identified by the 2023 census as the cause of significantly higher rates of whānau homelessness in some regions of Aotearoa

(Statistics NZ, 2024). Some children may also reside in transitional housing if their whānau have accepted support to secure safe temporary housing and their parents or caregivers have access to services that enable them to learn skills to help them gain and sustain tenancy in a suitable home (Holtrop et al., 2015).

Children are frequently members of the hidden homeless. This is due to the data, which is captured by agencies/organisations, being provided by adults; additionally, children often experience forms of homelessness (overcrowding, living doubled up with whānau or friends) that are not easily identified (Pehi et al., 2025). Hidden homeless children can also be children who are with a single parent in a shelter or temporary housing option, such as a victim of domestic abuse who escapes the home with their children and enters a support process and its accompanying services. This situation, as is the case with transitional housing, provides support and a place to stay, but it is not a home; these circumstances are defined as homelessness under the New Zealand Government's definition (Statistics NZ, 2015). Often, emergency and transitional housing involves time limits, leading to further instability and stress (Work and Income, 2025; MHUD, 2025).

Internationally and in Aotearoa, there has been some research done on children/youth and homelessness. This research is often undertaken from medical, psychological, or social work perspectives, and it attempts to gain an understanding of the prevalence, mental health impacts, and health conditions relating to children experiencing homelessness. A common thread throughout the research both internationally and in Aotearoa is the negative impacts of homelessness on children and youth in the areas of poor health and psychological harm, as well as the increased likelihood of further experiences of adversity and adverse life course outcomes (see Aviles & Helfrich, 2006; Bassuk, 2010; Carrasco, 2019; Choe, 2021; Cumella et al., 1998; Cutuli & Herbers, 2019; Duffield, 2020; Edwards, 2020; Fu et al, 2015; Griffin et al., 2019; Herbers et al., 2014; Howden-Chapman et al., 2013, 2021; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2019; Lai et al., 2023; Lorelle & Grothaus, 2015; Murran & Brady, 2023; Nathan, 2021; Oliver et al., 2017; Pehi et al., 2025; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013; Williams, 2023; Williams et al., 2024; Wooley, 2014; Yu et al., 2025). A point that has been made in the literature from both Aotearoa and other countries is that there is often no clear indication of the number of children who are affected by homelessness, and this leads to children being members of the hidden homeless (Crawley et al., 2013; Hallet, 2011; Pehi et al., 2025). This can be attributed to the reality that census and other relevant identifying

forms, such as school enrolment documents, are completed by the responsible adult in the child's life and will therefore reflect the adult's answers. In the Aotearoa context, studies have further suggested that the lack of consistent data collection from agencies and organisations that work with whānau experiencing homelessness is a contributor to children being part of the "hidden homeless" (Anderson, 2012; Pehi et al., 2025).

Children experiencing homelessness with their whānau encounter further barriers and challenges in their attempts to remain engaged with society (Haskett, 2017; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). In many cases, the period preceding homelessness will have included some form of adverse experience, including but not limited to domestic violence, poverty, mental health crises, or substance abuse (Chow et al., 2015; Haskett, 2017; Holtrop et al., 2015; Vissing, 1995). The maternal parent in a homeless whānau may have suffered incidences of severe depression, and the pressures of being homeless can lead to an increased likelihood of physical or verbal abuse against the child/ren as the parents struggle to cope with the reality of their situation (Haskett, 2017; Holtrop et al., 2015).

2.4 Homelessness as an Adverse Experience

The negative consequences of homelessness during childhood are so significant that homelessness has been identified as an ACE (Asmundson & Afifi, 2019; Mersky et al., 2017; Sheffler et al., 2019). The construct of ACEs was first explored by researchers in 1995 in the context of examining potential links between an adult's reported ACEs, negative health outcomes, and shortened lifespan. The original CDC-Kaiser ACE study published by Felitti et al. (1998) was a retrospective study that identified 10 adverse childhood experiences. Adults were asked to answer a questionnaire about which (if any) of the ACEs they had experienced, as well as their current adult experiences across a range of indicators, including physical and mental health, socioeconomic status, and employment. The ten ACEs identified in the study fell into three categories. The first category was abuse, including physical, emotional, and sexual. The second category was neglect, encompassing both physical and emotional aspects. The third category was household dysfunction, which focused on the mental illness of a significant adult (parent or caregiver), an incarcerated relative, violence against the child's mother, substance abuse by a significant adult, and divorce. The ACE study was groundbreaking because it was the first to demonstrate clear links between an individual's childhood experiences and their adult life outcomes. Further to this, it was noted that ACEs were traumatic and

stressful and that “stressful or traumatic childhood experiences have negative neurodevelopmental impacts that persist over the lifespan and that increase the risk of a variety of health and social problems” (Felitti et al., 1998, p. 253)

The pathways to homelessness are not always clearly understood. However, research both internationally and in Aotearoa has explored pathways involving ACE exposure, substance abuse or mental health concerns, relationship dissolution, social networks, and debt (Amore, 2007; Bonakdar, 2024; Davis et al., 2019; Heerde et al., 2022; Mallett et al., 2009; Martijn & Sharpe, 2006; McMinn et al., 2024; Samuels et al., 2019).

Although ACEs have been researched extensively over the past 25 years, most studies have focused on their impact on life course outcomes. This is particularly true when it comes to researching the childhood experiences of adults, including but not limited to people who are part of the homeless population. Research in Aotearoa, for example, has focused on the role that ACEs play in pathways to homelessness among adults experiencing homelessness (McMinn et al., 2024).

2.4.1 The Impact of Homelessness on Children and Young People

Previous research has focused on understanding the experiences of youth (identified as those aged between 13–18 years) living with homelessness and the impact this has on their ability to engage with social structures, including but not limited to health care, mental health support, and education (Aviles & Helfrich, 2006; Bethell et al., 2014; Malenfant & Nichols, 2025; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2018). Research on the impact of homelessness on school-aged children (between 5 and 13 years old) is more limited internationally and in Aotearoa (J. Kim, 2020).

In Australia, homelessness was found to negatively impact children’s “sense of security, mood, behaviour, physical health, education, and overall experience of childhood” (Kirkman et al., 2010, p.1). Further Australian research has asserted there is a “need for services to engage with children as individuals in their own right, to listen to and acknowledge their stories” (Moore et al., 2011). Research in the USA has identified adverse impacts of childhood homelessness, including poor physical and mental health, behavioural issues, low educational engagement and attainment, and an increased likelihood of dying while still in childhood (Maness & Khan, 2014; Portwood et al., 2015) .

There is an acknowledged connection between homelessness and children and young people entering foster care (Zlotnick, 2009; Zorc et al., 2013). Furthermore,

children and young people in foster care are likely to receive multiple placements, i.e., move multiple times between carer households, during their time in the system, which is an acknowledged form of homelessness (Skobba et al., 2023; Watts et al., 2006). Zlotnick (2009) stated that "Foster care and homelessness are categorizations of people based on their temporary and transient living situations so when children classified as 'homeless' enter foster care, they are reclassified as 'foster care children.'" (p. 323). In a paper on a presentation during the Australasian conference on child abuse and neglect (Watts et al., 2006), the insights of four members of the Care Youth Council were shared. The youth participants outlined that the stigma they felt from people knowing that they were in foster care or had experienced multiple placements caused harm and made them feel as though just by virtue of existing as themselves, they were in some way shameful or should feel shame (Watts et al., 2006). They went on to say that they believed the way forward to improving outcomes for youth in their position was to be seen as a unique and valuable individual in their own right rather than a case number; that they deserved to receive "your time, your energy, your nurturing" (Watts, 2006, p. 19) from the adults working with them across the systems and agencies involved. Their last point was particularly relevant to not only youth who have been uplifted or sought out support and receive it through Oranga Tamariki, but to youth who become homeless when the age of care support runs out - "Lastly, we need stability. If we have all of the above but do not feel as though we belong anywhere, and cannot establish roots, then our growth and development will be stunted." (Watts, 2006, p.19).

In Aotearoa, research has been conducted into childhood homelessness, including identifying the number of children within the housing system (Pehi et al., 2025), the physical and emotional well-being of children living in emergency housing (Williams, 2023; Williams et al., 2024), and the negative impacts on physical health (Howden-Chapman et al., 2013). Research has also identified that it is challenging to accurately determine the number of children who are homeless even when the significant adult in their whānau engages with support services; this is due to poor communication and disparities in data collected by these services (Pehi et al., 2025). Inadequate housing is a causal factor in poor health and the increased hospitalisations of children (Howden-Chapman et al., 2013). Children living in emergency housing are at a higher risk of physical injuries and reduced social interaction (Williams, 2023; Williams et al., 2024).

The research conducted has revealed clear themes regarding the impact of homelessness on children's connection to their community and broader environment,

including their educational environment. Educational engagement and achievement have been recognised as positive factors in life course outcomes (Ross & Van Willigen, 1997), and, as such, education is important to consider in the context of childhood homelessness.

2.5 Education and the Experience of Homelessness

Education encompasses all the learning, skills and knowledge acquisition that a person gains throughout their lifetime (Bass, 1997; Biesta, 2011; Edgerton et al., 2011). This knowledge and skill can be acquired through a range of informal contexts, including whānau and cultural settings, as well as formal contexts such as schools and learning institutions (e.g., early childhood learning centres, technical academies, and primary schools; Bass, 1997). However, this study focuses on the impact of childhood homelessness in primary and intermediate schools from the perspectives of educators working with children aged between 5 and 13 years. Children's engagement, academic achievement, and behaviours are considered within the framework of educator perspectives.

The impact of homelessness on education warrants consideration because, as Ross and Van Willigen (1997) assert, successful participation in schooling can lead to improved quality of life. This improved quality of life is connected to what Ross and Van Willigen (1997) describe as a socially accepted understanding that the successful attainment of school achievement standards and certificates increases the likelihood of securing employment, particularly in roles that offer financial stability and potential social status. On the other hand, an individual's lack of educational attainment or negative experiences within the education system are likely to impact the financial stability, socio-economic status, and life course outcomes of both them and their children (Haghanikar & Hooper, 2021; Havlik et al., 2025; LaFavor et al., 2020; Miech et al., 2001; Thielking et al., 2017; Wolfe & Haverman, 2001).

The right to participate in education is supported by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which the New Zealand government ratified in 1993 (Smith, 2007). Children not only have the right to participate in education; it is compulsory for children and young people in Aotearoa aged between 6 and 16 years to attend school (Ministry of Education, 2024c).

In the remainder of this section, I begin by outlining the purpose of education. This is followed by an overview of education and the importance of relationships and trust. I then move on to the role of educators in creating a sense of belonging, including

their understanding of how important it is for children to feel personally included, respected, accepted, and valued. Following this, I draw on the Whare Tapa Whā model to explore the role of educators in supporting hauora. I then examine the interactions that schools have with non-educational agencies and organisations in relation to supporting children's participation, engagement, and achievement. I conclude the section by discussing the impact of homelessness on education.

2.5.1 The Purpose of Educator Roles and Responsibilities Within Education

A key point across the literature is that the purpose of education is to support children to grow and develop into good citizens of the society they live in (Ministry of Education, 2007; Roosevelt, 2008; Smith, 2007). Eleanor Roosevelt stated that the function of education was to "give children a desire to learn and to teach them how to use their minds and where to go to acquire facts when their curiosity is aroused" (Roosevelt, 2008, p. 312).

Research has highlighted that the education system, though influenced by dominant political discourses (Biesta, 2011; Edgerton et al., 2011), aims overall to provide a pathway towards the development of a foundation of knowledge and skills that are required by the curriculum and are intended to create members of society who, at the end of their formal schooling, will be positive, contributing members of the society in which they live (Edgerton et al., 2011; Ministry of Education, 2007; Przybylska, 2011; Selwyn, 2019). As part of this goal, the education system plays a crucial role in providing opportunities for socialisation and fostering positive values (Biesta, 2011; Hännikäinen & Rasku-Puttonen, 2010; Jones & Doolittle, 2017; Przybylska, 2011; Safitri et al., 2021). Within this system, it is the role of education professionals to develop and deliver classroom learning programmes that cultivate an environment in which children are encouraged and empowered to participate and achieve these purposes/aims (McChesney & Gordon, 2025).

2.5.1.1 Educators and the Connection Between Lived Experiences and Education Roles, Approaches, and Practices

Kwaah et al. (2024) discussed the role that an educator's "social and cultural characteristics" (p. 554) have in the development of effective classroom programmes and relationships with learners. Lee and Schallert (2016) explored the connection between an educator's individual "self" (p. 73), which is shaped by whānau, culture, and early-life social interactions, and the development of their professional "identity" (p. 73). Lee and

Schallert (2016) argue that educators, both during their initial education and in ongoing professional development, need to understand the experiences, beliefs, and values that underpin their classroom practice to build effective connections with their students. As societies and classrooms become more diverse in terms of cultures and identities, "teachers need to come to know themselves as ethnic and encultured if they are to understand their students and engage with the complexities of teaching for diversity" (Santoro, 2009, p. 41).

Educators who share cultural or social affiliations with their learners may use these experiences, beliefs, or values to build positive teacher–student relationships (Schwartz & Konchiki, 2024). Teachers who share a cultural or ethnic heritage with their learners have been found to positively impact students' motivation and engagement in learning programmes (Rasheed et al., 2020). Also, educators who share a cultural or ethnic heritage with children in their educational environments can act as role models and encourage parent engagement (Driessen, 2015). Furthermore, an educator's own experiences as a student and in school interactions may influence the approach they use in their teaching practice (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1994).

Peddle (2020) conducted research into the impact of an educator's ACEs on their ability to establish relationships, build connections, and teach children with traumatic experiences. The study was undertaken in the USA and recruited educators from "pre-kindergarten through 12th grade" (Peddle, 2020, p. 36). The findings from this study were that educators who had experienced ACEs were "better able to build relationships and inform their classroom practices" (Peddle, 2020, p. 65). Furthermore, Peddle (2020) identified that "teachers use their own realities, their learning skills, and prevalence of trauma to build and maintain safe, trusting relationships with students" (p. 67). An educator's experiences of trauma and their ability to share their experiences with students were identified as valuable for developing connections and relationships that facilitated learning engagement with children who had experienced trauma (Peddle, 2020). Importantly, this research highlighted that educators themselves determined the extent to which they shared their experiences, and that each educator had their own "line in the sand" (Peddle, 2020, p. 68) regarding what they shared.

Adeoye (2021) studied the impact of an educator's ACEs on their classroom practice. This research found that educators with ACEs could use their own experiences to identify students "who are currently undergoing traumatic events" (Adeoye, 2021, p. 92).

Conversely, Hubel et al. (2020) studied the impact of educators' ACEs on their teaching practice in an ECE context in the USA. This study found that educators who reported experiencing multiple ACEs were observed to have "facilitated a lower quality social and emotional climate in their classrooms" (Hubel et al., 2020, p.6). Importantly, Hubel et al. (2020) noted that other factors in the ECE sector, including high stress, low job security, limited professional development, and inadequate pay, may also have contributed to these findings, and further research was needed. Additionally, the impact of ACEs on human and social–emotional development was discussed, along with the role of explicit professional development and mindfulness training in improving and shaping teaching practice (Hubel et al., 2020). In their research on the impact of ACEs and workplace stress on the professional practice of ECE teachers, Rancher and Moreland (2023) also found that teachers who reported one or more ACEs were "associated with lower quality teacher–child classroom behaviour" (p. 190). It was suggested that purposeful professional learning of trauma-focused approaches and interventions would support their work with children (Rancher & Moreland, 2023).

Though not specifically focused on educators, Esaki and Larkin (2013) investigated the prevalence of ACEs amongst professionals working in an agency delivering residential care and schooling for children who had experienced trauma. Educators were among the professionals asked to participate in this research. This study found that professionals working in the agency had a higher prevalence of ACEs than the national norms (Esaki & Larkin, 2013). Of note, the research highlighted that professionals who had experienced ACEs were at greater risk of experiencing secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, and compassion fatigue when working with children from traumatic backgrounds (Esaki & Larkin, 2013). A key finding from the study was the importance of implementing a supportive and reflective organisational culture to improve staff well-being and the quality of the service they provide (Esaki & Larkin, 2013). Nevertheless, Steen et al. (2021) investigated the impact of ACEs on social workers, and found that experiencing and surviving ACEs can lead to resilience that may be a "strength" when working with clients (Steen et al., 2021, p. 189).

2.5.2 Education and the Importance of Relationships and Trust

A key component of working with children in educational spaces is taking the time to identify the experiences a learner brings, both shared and unique, in order to understand their needs and facilitate relationship-building (McKay & Macomber, 2023). Positive and trusted relationships between educators and learners, between educators and

whānau, and between student peers are all essential to the development of a positive learning environment, and they also serve as a vehicle for communication (Bishop & Rigney, 2023; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Skinner, 2024; Swick, 1996; Swick & Bailey, 2004). Having a strong, caring relationship with students enables educators to understand the learning needs of the children in their classrooms (Bishop & Rigney, 2023) and to identify if any of their well-being needs are not being met (Koslouski & Stark, 2021; Spratt, 2016; Swick & Bailey, 2004). Furthermore, positive and trusted relationships between teachers and students have been identified as a way to build resilience and mitigate harm caused by ACEs (Keane & Evans, 2022).

Establishing positive relationships with their learners is one way educators can promote participation and engagement in classroom learning programmes and advance students' learning goals (Bishop & Rigney, 2023; Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002; Spratt, 2016). When the educator prioritises building relationships with their learners, they are also modelling to the children in their classrooms both the importance of relationships and how to build positive relationships with others (Moore, 2013; Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Spratt, 2016).

Building positive, trusting relationships with whānau is also an essential aspect of an educator's role. When an educator makes connections with whānau, they can gain an understanding of the context a child may be navigating outside the school environment and, therefore, better meet their needs within the school environment (Dawson & McHugh, 2002; McLaughlin et al., 2015). The educator–whānau relationship can also be a positive factor in supporting children's engagement and achievement in their learning (Epstein, 2018).

Moreover, its essential for educators in learning environments to understand the role of peer relationships and actively work to foster positive relationships among their students (Gowing, 2019; Griffin et al., 2019; Moses & Villodas, 2017; Perdue et al., 2009; Slaten et al., 2019). As school is a place where children and youth are required to attend, having positive relationships with their peers can have beneficial knock-on effects on how they feel about their connection to the school environment and their engagement in learning (Gowing, 2019; Perdue et al., 2009). It is acknowledged that experiencing ACEs can negatively impact a student's attendance and engagement with all aspects of school; however, positive peer relationships can support ongoing engagement and achievement in education (Moses & Villodas, 2017). Conversely, a lack of positive peer relationships, or the presence of negative peer relations (i.e., bullying), is understood to have negative

impacts on academic achievement and a student's sense of belonging in their educational context (Slaten et al., 2019).

Relationships are a fundamental component of establishing positive environments in educational contexts. Educator–student and peer relationships play a role in the establishment and maintenance of students' sense of belonging. The following section considers the role of belongingness in education spaces.

2.5.3 Educators and the Role of Belongingness in Education Spaces

While belongingness and relationships overlap in certain areas, belongingness focuses more on how the individual feels within an environment/community/peer network and their perspective on what helps them feel that they belong. It encompasses the development of their identity, positive self-esteem, and motivation to participate and achieve, all of which are essential aspects, including relationships (Griffin et al., 2019). As a sense of belongingness is essential to human well-being, it follows that it is important in school/learning environments (Tillery et al., 2012).

Several studies into school belongingness and the development of measurement tools to determine a student's belongingness have focused on adolescents — young people aged between 13 and 17 years (Allen et al., 2017; Griffin et al., 2019; Malenfant & Nichols, 2025; Raffaele Mendez et al., 2018; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). There has also been research into preschool children's sense of belongingness in early childhood education spaces, which have identified that the connection to adults and peers, as well as play, cultural practices, and the facilitation of a caring environment by educators all play a role in facilitating a sense of belonging (Johansson & Rosell, 2021; Karlsudd, 2022; Kyrönlampi et al., 2021). Studies that have engaged primary school children have often focused on the transition from primary school (or intermediate/middle school) to high school environments (see Van Ryzin et al., 2009; Vaz et al., 2015). Despite studies' tendency to focus on adolescents, the key aspects of belongingness are considered applicable to school environments and educators' work at all levels, including primary school. Children's sense of belonging in educational spaces is associated with positive impacts on social and emotional development, educational engagement, and academic achievement. Studies tend to focus on one or other of these aspects to balance the needs of the student at their stage. For example, strong and positive peer relationships appear to be of higher importance for older children/adolescents to feel like they belong, whereas, among younger children, positive relationships with the adults in their learning spaces

have been found to have more impact on their feelings of belongingness (Burdick et al., 2021). Developing the conditions to foster a sense of belonging is an integral part of an educator's work.

In educational spaces, Goodenow (1993) identified four key aspects of "belongingness" that determine whether a learner can establish a sense of belonging: (i) feeling personally included, (ii) feeling personally respected, (iii) feeling personally accepted, and (iv) feeling valued by their peers and adults in their environment. These are often used in research on belonging, motivation, and developing identity in educational spaces (see Allen et al., 2017, Craggs & Kelly, 2018; St-Amand et al., 2017). This section now discusses school belongingness using the four key aspects identified in Goodenow (1993) as a framework.

2.5.3.1 Feeling Personally Included

The first key element for educators to consider when aiming to foster students' sense of belonging is the feeling of personal inclusion in the learning spaces and teaching and learning programmes in educational settings. One of the key relationships in educational settings is between educators and students (Burdick et al., 2021). Indeed, positive student–educator relationships are a factor in each of the four aspects of belongingness. With regard to feeling personally included, one identified factor involves the educator understanding the student as an individual, including their unique contexts and strengths (Dawson & McHugh, 2002). By shaping their interactions with students in this way, the educator demonstrates to each student that they understand who they are, what they need to feel successful, and the best ways they can receive and share information and learning experiences (Chow et al., 2015; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). When an educator can show their understanding of what the child needs to feel included and incorporate strategies to make students see and feel their inclusion is a priority to the educator, the student develops a much stronger sense of belongingness (see Allen et al., 2017; Chow et al., 2015; Goodenow, 1993; Moore, 2013; St-Armand et al., 2017).

Peer relationships are a crucial aspect of feeling personally included. Educators foster a sense of belonging for and between their students when they create learning environments that develop positive social skills, emotional regulation, and communication. To achieve belongingness in learning environments, educators promote an understanding of the value of both differences and similarities with peers; and establish a support network for individual students (Allen et al., 2017; Goodenow, 1993; Gowing, 2019). Having a friend group and feeling included in the activities by peers is an

acknowledged component of belongingness (Griffin et al., 2019). The culture the educators promote outside the classroom but within the school environment more broadly is also a foundation that helps students feel it is safe to contribute and share (Allen et al., 2017; Gowing, 2019; Griffin et al., 2019). This is applicable to both being included by their peers when the class is asked to form small groups (i.e., knowing they will have people to group with) and being included in the playground so that they are not isolated and lonely while surrounded by people (Miller et al., 2014; Moore, 2013; Sheldon, 2011).

2.5.3.2 Feeling Personally Respected

Feeling respected in education spaces is interwoven with the other 3 aspects of belongingness in many ways — students feel respected when they are included and accepted, as well as when the people around them value both them as a person and their contribution to the group (Gowing, 2019; Griffin et al., 2019). However, there are also elements of feeling respected that are linked to how safe students feel physically and emotionally in their learning spaces (Griffin et al., 2019; Moore, 2013; Skovdal & Campbell, 2015). When they know that their physical and psychological safety is prioritised by the educators in the spaces they spend time, they will know that they and their needs are respected by the people around them (Koslouski et al., 2021; Spratt, 2016).

With the rise of trauma-informed practice in teaching pedagogy and research on the impact that feeling emotionally unsafe has on children, it is now understood that feeling unsafe affects cognitive ability, including emotional regulation, social interactions, problem-solving, and memory (Burdick et al., 2021; Dombo & Sabatino, 2019; Moore, 2013; Skovdal & Campbell, 2015). Therefore, for a child to feel like they belong in their educational environment, they must be provided with emotional safety through the actions of educators so that they can regulate their emotions and interact positively and effectively with peers and adults (Koslouski & Stark, 2021). This is particularly notable given that students' inability to regulate their emotions or communicate effectively with others can have a knock-on effect on their relationships and, therefore, their sense of personal inclusion (Allen et al., 2023; Duke et al., 2010; Moore, 2013; Murphey & Sacks, 2019).

Physical aspects of the classroom and the school environment fostered by the educator can also play a role in promoting a psychologically safe environment. These include educators creating a learning environment that teaches and affirms social skills,

physical safety, emotional regulation, and positive relationships (Allen et al., 2017). Educators using a trauma-informed lens demonstrate understanding and therefore teach students that it is important for them to look after mental health and physical health. Educators may also adapt their practice to create an environment that is as calm, consistent, and predictable as is reasonably achievable (Moore, 2013; Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Skovdal & Campbell, 2015; Spratt, 2016.

2.5.3.3 Feeling Personally Accepted

The development of a person's identity is an important element of childhood and adolescence. To ensure that students feel personally accepted, it is vital that their identity is acknowledged and accepted in their learning spaces. In education, a metaphor that is used refers to educators needing to consider a student's "invisible backpack." This metaphor appears to have its origins in McIntosh's (1989) concept of the invisible backpack of white privilege. The idea of students carrying strengths, weaknesses, special interests, or traumas in an "invisible backpack" into learning spaces has been discussed and combined with the concept of student and community "funds of knowledge," as described by González & Moll (2002). This concept focuses on the aspects of a child's life and identity that cannot be seen (whānau values, cultural knowledge, skills and talents) and that are brought with them into their learning spaces (González & Moll, 2002; Moll et al., 2006; Reyes et al., 2016; Roe, 2019). Combined, these ideas highlight that it is the role of the educator to create an environment in which the child feels comfortable about pulling things out of their invisible backpack — that is, drawing on their funds of knowledge or sharing their talents or concerns — to utilise during learning activities and to provide further context with which the educator can engage in order to provide them with meaningful learning experiences. An essential component of this strategy is that, through educators' deliberate acts of teaching and connection, children can be empowered to feel safe to share their knowledge and experiences as part of their learning process (Roe, 2019). This approach allows students' strengths to come through and enables the identification of, and the opportunity to work on, any weaknesses or challenges (González & Moll, 2002; Koslouski & Stark, 2021; Moore, 2013; Reyes et al., 2016; Roe, 2019).

2.5.3.4 Feeling Valued by Their Peers and Adults in the Environment

The fourth and final key element of belongingness identified by Goodenow (1993) is feeling valued by peers and adults in the learning environment. Goodenow (1993) described this as knowing that you are surrounded by people who care about whether you

are present, who will listen to your ideas even when they disagree, and who positively acknowledge your voice and contribution (see also Koslouski & Stark, 2021; Rudling et al., 2023). The presence of these elements, implemented and led by the educator, is understood to be an important protective factor that supports resilience and contributes to the development of a sense of belonging. This resilience, in turn, can further support improved engagement, relationships, and a sense of belonging in educational spaces (Burdick et al., 2021).

Developing and maintaining a sense of belonging in educational spaces is crucial to a student's personal and academic growth (Allen et al., 2023). Educators are responsible for creating environments and relationships that foster such a sense of belonging. When educators give attention to the individual needs of the students (Dawson & McHugh, 2002), the scaffolding of positive peer interactions (Allen et al, 2018), and the deliberate teaching of social-emotional skills (Allen et al., 2017), then a sense of belonging can be created for learners. Alongside the development of a sense of belonging, educators need to understand the overall well-being — hauora — of a student. The role of educators and education in establishing hauora for learners is discussed in the next section.

2.5.4 The role of educators in education and establishing Hauora

Hauora is a Māori concept associated with holistic well-being. Holistic well-being is described as encompassing "individual, relational and collective" well-being (Kitching, 2019, p. 45). This section begins by situating hauora within educators' official work. I first highlight the role that education sites play in sharing resources and information on health and well-being. I also discuss how understanding the hauora of learners and whānau is a necessary component for educators to navigate in their daily work, alongside meeting the curriculum and achievement expectations of the teaching profession. This section discusses the second central theme described by educators—the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity on children's and whānau hauora (holistic well-being). Finally, I utilise aspects of the Whare Tapa Whā model to unpack hauora in relation to students' physical, social, mental, and emotional well-being.

The education system, and schools in particular, are often identified as community hubs and are frequently utilised by other agencies as a nexus for distributing or collecting information (Rudling et al., 2023). As such, they address aspects of collective well-being (Kitching, 2019). Schools and educators work with the children in the community and

their whānau, and they engage with the broader community to facilitate the provision of a range of learning opportunities and additional supports that cater to the physical and emotional needs and interests of the learners and their whānau (Mutch & Collins, 2012; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002; Ukoha, 2021).

Educators have a significant role in building and maintaining positive, trusted relationships with learners and their whānau. They have access to the personal lives of learners and their whānau, and this gives them the ability to identify any struggles or concerns for or within the whānau, which in turn can be a conduit to providing the resources and establishing the needed support for a learner to achieve a sense of hauora (see Dawson & McHugh, 2002; Malenfant & Nichols, 2025; Powers-Costello & Swick, 2011; Quinn-Schuldt, 2010; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 1997; Reinke et al., 2011; Rudling et al., 2023). Schools, depending on their community, may be responsible for providing food, clothing, and support for physical and mental health. Educators also offer emotional support and understanding to whānau and children in their communities (Dawson & McHugh, 2002; Malenfant & Nichols, 2025; Murphey & Sacks, 2019).

In the following section, I discuss the Whare Tapa Whā model of hauora (Durie, 1994), which is specific to the Aotearoa context and has been established as a guiding framework for supporting well-being in classrooms in Aotearoa (Ministry of Education, 2024b).

2.5.4.1 Te Whare Tapa Whā

According to the Ministry of Education (2024b), hauora is described as "a Māori philosophy of health unique to Aotearoa." The concept of hauora in education settings is frequently associated with Sir Mason Durie's (1994) Te Whare Tapa Whā model of hauora/well-being (Ministry of Education, 2024b). The Whare Tapa Whā model (Figure 1), utilises the structure of a wharenui to describe the interconnected taha (sides). These are taha tinana (physical well-being), taha wairua (spiritual well-being), taha hinengaro (mental/emotional well-being), and taha whānau (social well-being). In this way, the aspects of relationships, belongingness, and a positive sense of self cannot be separated from hauora.

Figure 1

Te Whare Tapa Whā

Educators need to focus on supporting students' development of the skills required to engage positively in both social/whānau settings and at school. These skills are essential as they enable children to understand that it is okay to have emotions, and they encourage children to recognise the contexts that prompt certain emotions, thereby helping them solve problems and develop self-regulation and reflection strategies (Allen et al., 2023; Kitching, 2019).

In Aotearoa, Te Whare Tapa Whā has been used to structure well-being programmes for classroom delivery (Rix & Bernay, 2014) and has been identified as part of a broader approach to well-being in Aotearoa classrooms (Worrall-Bader, 2023). Te Momo (2022) described Te Whare Tapa Whā as a model that can work towards hauora and meet the cultural needs of Māori individuals specifically, while also being applicable and relatable to people from all cultures.

2.6 Schools, Educators, and Their Interactions with Other Agencies, Organisations, and Systems

Schools and educators interact with a range of agencies and organisations in the course of their usual work roles. These organisations may be external providers of curriculum programmes, such as sport coaching from a regional or national body, government agencies involved in child welfare, or organisations that provide professional learning development opportunities and resources for educators to upskill in specific areas of practice. Educators often need to collaborate with professionals and organisations to cater to the specialised needs of their learners, which can involve incorporating the child's whānau into planning to ensure the child's educational needs are met (Ekins, 2015; Mutch & Collins, 2012). Schools, when identified as community hubs, become a well-known location to people in the community and often carry a reputation that makes them trustworthy in the eyes of their community members (Mutch & Collins, 2012; Rudling et al., 2023).

At the same time, government agencies, systems, and other organisations recognise that schools may be places where they can reach a significant portion of the community. This can be linked to the fact that schools are the face of one of the few government departments with which whānau with children are expected to engage (Duffield, 2020; Malenfant & Nichols, 2025). While the age range for compulsory enrolment in education varies from country to country, the mandate to have a child enrolled for a specific number of years provides agencies and organisations with an effective way to reach members of the community that fall within certain demographics (Rudling et al., 2023; Vaivada et al., 2022). As a result, in addition to providing educational opportunities that cover the curriculum, schools may also be asked to facilitate the provision of health checks (Vaivada et al., 2022) or send home information in the form of pamphlets or a segment in the school newsletter. While the potential for schools to reach the population of whānau with children is well established, the reality is that multi-agency collaboration is not always effective in addressing the issues it is intended to address. Some studies have identified that this is due to the lack of uniformity in organisational policies and privacy regulations, as well as the unknown nature of interpersonal dynamics between members of different organisations, which can make collaborative efforts ineffective (Milbourne et al., 2003; Pehi et al., 2025). However, Yon et al. (1993) found that purposeful communication between schools and support organisations in their communities could be a valuable way to identify at-risk children

and whānau. Other research has shown that improved communication between schools, the use of liaison staff to work with people experiencing homelessness, and the considered and explicit sharing of behaviours observed in schools can help schools identify children and whānau experiencing homelessness more effectively (Shephard et al., 2021).

Research also indicates that there is an understood role for people in educational spaces who embody the role of social worker, whānau advocate, and counsellor. In the USA and Europe, there is a more extended history of social workers working in schools (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Beddoe, 2019; Sherman, 2016; Singstad et al., 2024). There are also school social workers established in Australia, Hong Kong, and Aotearoa (Beddoe et al., 2018; Lee, 2012; To, 2009). The social worker's role encompasses a range of areas. One of these is to promote positive engagement with educators and school environments that foster learners' academic achievement (Lee, 2012). School social workers can also support educators in their work with students experiencing behavioural or social issues in the classroom (Singstad et al., 2024). Social workers can likewise support whānau to engage with the educational context by identifying where whānau may need extra support (Lee, 2012; McDavitt et al., 2018). Recent UK research found that school social workers had a positive role to play in promoting physical and emotional well-being, fostering connections between schools and whānau, and potentially mitigating the need for government agency involvement (Westlake et al., 2024).

In Aotearoa, research has examined the roles of social workers in schools (SWiS) (Beddoe, 2019; Beddoe et al., 2018; Pirika, 2021). This research found that SWiS are assigned to low-socioeconomic areas (Beddoe et al., 2018). SWiS reported they worked closely with educators, whānau, and children to provide social and emotional support, advocacy, and communication pathways (Beddoe et al., 2018; Beddoe, 2019; Pirika, 2021). Pirika (2021) spoke with Māori SWiS about their work and identified the positive impact of a te ao Māori (Māori world view) approach on both Māori and non-Māori learners and their whānau. Meanwhile, Beddoe (2019) discussed the importance of ensuring that social workers entering the SWiS system are inducted into the role, given the wide-ranging areas of responsibility they assume. Combined, this research highlighted that, when SWiS develop strong, positive relationships with educators, children, and whānau, they are better able to understand the needs of the people they are working with (Beddoe, 2019; Beddoe et al., 2018; Pirika, 2021).

The discussion in this section has shown that, once educators have established trusted relationships with the children and whānau in their communities, they may begin

interacting with other agencies or organisations on behalf of the child and/or their whānau. This may be in the form of generating a quote to provide to WINZ, and answering a follow-up phone call, to help a whānau get school uniforms for their child; contacting charity organisations to gain access to food, clothing, or stationery supplies at low to no cost for whānau; or being an advocate for a whānau who is seeking support (Shevchenko et al., 2020).

2.7 The Impact of Homelessness on Children's Education

Research has shown that homelessness significantly impacts a child's ability to stay at one school for consecutive years of schooling, maintain regular attendance, and feel able to participate in learning programmes (Galvez & Luna, 2014; Murphy, 2011; O'Leary, 2001; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). In addition, the link between poverty and an increased risk of homelessness has been found to impact the ability of parents and caregivers to fund the necessities required for children's successful and positive engagement with education (Brumley et al., 2015; Canoso, 2021; Cutuli & Herbers, 2019; Haskett, 2017; Pehi et al., 2025; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013; Semanchin Jones et al., 2015). These necessities may include stationery, food for break times, and compulsory uniforms. Not having the means to provide these things consistently can cause stress for parents, which can then affect how the child feels about school (Holtrop et al., 2015; Sandstrom & Huerta, 2013). Research has suggested that, due to their living situation, homeless children may feel stigmatised in their school environments through the words and actions of both adults and other children (Hallett et al., 2015; Ryan, 2018; Vissing, 1995; Watts, 2006). Each of these factors affects the work educators undertake to establish learning programmes and positive learning environments for all learners in their classes. The remainder of this section discusses the impact of homelessness on educators' work and the children they serve, specifically with regard to attendance, participation, and achievement.

2.7.1 Attendance

Homelessness can influence school attendance (Treglia et al., 2023). Repeated absences, which often occur with homeless children, impact the educator's ability to provide the child with sequential learning to achieve academic goals and to develop positive relationships with the child and their whānau (Canfield et al., 2016; Deck, 2017).

Given the difficult pressures involved in their living situation, children experiencing homelessness are more likely to miss school for reasons including a lack of easily portable food items, being tired or physically unwell due to a lack of sleep or adequate warmth and shelter, the inability to wear the correct uniform on any particular day, and a lack of transport options where the school is not within walking distance (Hallett, 2011; Masten et al., 2015; Vissing, 1995). Homeless children, due to the myriad challenges they face, can easily become lost in a system that has not yet found a way to prevent them from falling through the cracks and missing out on education due to a lapse in attendance (Cobb-Clark & Zhu, 2017; Hallett, 2011; Parrott et al., 2022; Wright-Howie, 2009).

The school environment may serve as a stable social space that the children feel comfortable in; therefore, their attendance and engagement may not be impacted if the school environment is supportive, consistent, and predictable, as "safety is felt through connections with people who have a calm and focused presence" (Murphey & Sacks, 2019, p. 19). Homeless children may want to be at school, as it is a warm, safe, and stable environment in which they can spend their day (Hallett, 2011; Howland et al., 2017; Vissing, 1995). On the other hand, they may view their school environment and the people within it with distrust — a place where they are forced to be through circumstances beyond their control (Rafferty et al., 2004; Shield & Warke, 2010; Wade et al., 2014). The school environment can cause resentment in children as they struggle to reconcile their past with their present, and in some cases, it can serve as a constant reminder of their adverse experiences (Hunt et al., 2000). All of these factors can impact attendance, alongside the physical and economic barriers.

Another factor influencing school attendance is the fact that homeless whānau are more likely to move between homes, and this can often necessitate a school change for the children (Cobb-Clark & Zhu 2017; Hallett, 2011; Vissing, 1995; Wright-Howie, 2009). Enrolling children in a new school due to an enforced, and at times traumatic, move can be difficult for parents who are required to provide documentation they may no longer have access to, such as vaccination records that have been lost due to the number of health providers seen (Vissing, 1995). Where a school zone is in effect, there is also a requirement to provide proof of residence, which is not always possible when the whānau is temporarily staying at someone else's permanent residence (Hallett, 2011; Vissing, 1995). These difficulties in enrolment can lead to large periods of time where children can remain unenrolled in any schooling as their parent or caregiver attempts to find a

stable, permanent living situation (Cobb-Clark & Zhu 2017; Hallett, 2011; Vissing, 1995; Wright-Howie, 2009).

2.7.2 Participation

It has been well established that the development of positive relationships between educators and students plays a role in establishing a foundation for participation (Bishop & Rigney, 2023; Moore et al., 2019). Educators can struggle to form connections with learners experiencing homelessness, either due to significant absences or feelings of distrust in the learner (Deck, 2017; Hunt et al., 2000). Children who do not feel fully seen, understood, and accepted for who they are by educators and peers in their learning environments will struggle to make connections or participate in the learning programmes, thereby making it difficult for them to find success (Allen et al., 2017; Goodenow, 1993; St-Armand et al., 2017). For example, a homeless child may not have access to the same level of play resources or items that are the current trend; this can lead them to feel like an outsider and unable to establish a connection with their peers, which, in turn, creates a barrier to engagement in the learning space (Knowles et al, 2016).

Overall, a homeless child may have many barriers to engaging in education, especially if they are struggling with trauma-induced low self-esteem or are finding it difficult to believe that they are wanted or valued (Labella et al., 2016; Wade et al, 2014). Children may experience the lasting effects of homelessness, which follow them into their school environments and affect both the way they feel about themselves and, potentially, the way that others view them. As discussed above, educators who create an environment that fosters positive relationships among themselves, the child, and their peers can help to establish a sense of belonging and facilitating participation.

Educators working with children impacted by homelessness may have to contend with social and/or emotional issues that have knock-on effects regarding their ability to positively interact with their peers in the learning space (Arnold & Fisch, 2011; Bettencourt et al., 2018; Knowles et al., 2016; Steele et al., 2016) or that may lead to behavioural attitudes such as defiance against adults (Baglivio et al., 2014). Homelessness rarely occurs in isolation, which increases the likelihood that children will struggle to make significant connections with peers (Frey et al., 2019; Pehi et al., 2025). Any behavioural issues a homeless child may have can also become a barrier to forming positive relationships with their peers, especially in their classrooms where other children

may avoid them for fear of being associated with behaviours that could affect them and/or get them into trouble (Murphey & Sacks, 2019).

A child impacted by homelessness is more likely to have difficulties trusting others — especially adults — as homelessness and the surrounding circumstances are more likely to involve a significant adult in the child's life (Garner, 2013; Pehi et al., 2025). The combination of a child exhibiting difficult behaviours, such as acting out in verbal or physical ways, can be challenging for educators and peers. Managing difficult behaviours while also attempting to meet expectations regarding learner progress toward academic goals adds a layer of stress to the learning environment. Ultimately, this can lead to a learning environment in which, intentionally or not, an affected child may pick up on the educator's stress and internalise it into their relationship with the educator (Arnold & Fisch, 2011). Research has demonstrated that a connection to a supportive and positive adult can significantly mitigate the adverse effects of homelessness on children and that the school is an important setting where this can occur (Murphey & Sacks, 2019; Sheldon, 2011).

2.7.3 Achievement

The structure of most Western school systems involves the sequential acquisition of skills and knowledge. This means that a child is expected to learn a particular skill or knowledge set in one unit and then apply that skill in subsequent units to support their learning of a new skill or knowledge set (Duschl et al., 2011). The combination of homelessness and the education system's structure presents challenges for educators who attempt to develop learning programmes that address the needs of children in their classrooms, and this ultimately creates a barrier to achievement for homeless students (Canfield et al., 2016; Tobin, 2016; Treglia et al., 2023; Vissing, 1995).

Educators working with children experiencing homelessness may observe a child struggling with the natural difficulty of new learning or with the mistakes that are part of the learning process (Dudovitz & Chung, 2019). Homeless children may be more likely to view learning mistakes as personal failures and as confirmation of the negative self-perception they may already have (Dudovitz & Chung, 2019). Alongside this, educators must work to create environments that mitigate the potentially negative impacts of (or that account for) children's natural inclination to compare their own actions and capabilities, as well as their home lives, with those of their peers (Gould et al., 2019; Hunt et al., 2000). Educational research has led many educators to understand that, when a

child compares their self-perception with their perception of peers, whether accurately or not, this can further embed their negative self-perception as a learner (Dudovitz & Chung, 2019).

Homeless children's academic engagement and achievement can also be harmed by the stress of the home environment, the lower likelihood of a stable home life routine, and the higher likelihood of inconsistent attendance (Cutuli & Herbers, 2019; Hallett, 2011; Havlik et al., 2025; Holtrop & McWey, 2015; Tobin et al., 2018; Vissing, 1995). For educators, this means they are working with children who may have limited opportunities to develop the positive social, emotional, and academic skills necessary to successfully engage in the classroom and achieve positive life outcomes in society (Perlman et al., 2017; Wright-Howie, 2009). Being behind the working level of their peer group can cause learners to internalise the causes, leading them to believe that this is due to their inherent lack of ability or intelligence, rather than it being to the result of the additional learning their peers have done when they themselves were not at school (Hallett, 2011).

Another factor that may impact homeless children's achievement levels relates to their level of stress in the classroom. Educators working with children affected by homelessness will often identify that the child is operating with higher stress levels than their non-affected peers (Hunt et al., 2000; Steele et al., 2016; Wade et al., 2014). This is likely to negatively affect the child's engagement in the classroom and their ability to process instructions and meet learning task expectations (Arnold & Fisch, 2011). Such behaviour is often labelled as behavioural issues, which can impact the educator's interactions with the child and may become a lens that colours the way children are viewed by significant adults in their educational environments (Murphey & Sacks, 2019). This lens can impact educators' development of learning programmes, as they may evaluate the child from the position of what they cannot do, rather than focusing on building on what they *can* do. This deficit model has the potential to negatively impact an educator's ability to recognise a child's positive attributes in their learning space, and it may consequently hamper a child's progress and engagement in the learning programme (McClelland et al., 2000; Skovdal & Campbell, 2015).

There is also an acknowledged relationship between the academic achievement of children experiencing homelessness and the rate of their absenteeism and participation (Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Lorelle & Grothaus, 2015; Miller, 2011b; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). However, it is not simply a lack of attendance or sporadic attendance that affects

academic achievement among children experiencing homelessness (Arnold & Fisch, 2011; Fantuzzo et al., 2012; Havlik et al., 2025; Murran & Brady, 2023). The many school changes that lead to children leaving or entering a learning space in the middle of a learning unit mean that they are more likely to have interruptions to knowledge or skill acquisition and fewer opportunities to apply knowledge or skills in the learning programme that is being delivered (Murran & Brady, 2023). Frequent changes in schools due to homelessness can also lead to children experiencing anxiety around assessment and testing, as they feel unsure and unsafe in the environment and are therefore unable to calmly access their logic and problem-solving skills or knowledge recall, even if they do know the subject matter being assessed (Semanchin Jones et al., 2018; Swick, 1996). They remain emotionally dysregulated, which is likely to impact their performance, thereby potentially providing achievement data that is not an accurate representation.

2.8 Educator Perspectives on the Impact of Homelessness on Children

Educator perspectives are a primary focus for this study. While some international studies have examined educators' perspectives on the impact of homelessness on their work and the children and whānau they support, such research remains scarce.

In the US educational system, researchers have identified educators as positive role models for supporting students experiencing homelessness (Reed-Victor & Stronge, 1997). Tobin et al. (2018) researched the understandings of homelessness held by teachers working in a low-socioeconomic status, high homelessness area. This study found that teachers differentiated learning and provided emotional support for children experiencing homelessness (Tobin et al., 2018). Furthermore, the study highlighted that the teachers had not received training specific to working with homeless children (Tobin et al., 2018). Wright et al. (2019) surveyed understandings of homelessness among pre-service early childhood educators, both before and after they completed a course on childhood homelessness.. Their work suggested that incorporating specific learning modules into initial teacher education programmes was beneficial for educators (Wright et al., 2019). The development of pre-service early childhood educators' confidence and sensitivity was also explored by Park et al. (2019) through learning experiences involving engagement with children and whānau in homeless shelters. This research found that some educators lacked an understanding of the challenges and the need for sensitivity specific to working with homeless children; the study also indicated that targeted learning in this area was beneficial to the development of educators' understanding (Park et al.,

2019). Smart (2018) spoke to middle school teachers about their lived experience teaching homeless students. These teachers believed they should receive more education about working with homeless children, and they felt that they could increase these children's engagement in learning programmes by developing positive relationships with them.

In Ireland, Scanlon and McKenna (2018) undertook research that highlighted the needs of homeless children in emergency housing. They surveyed education professionals to gather information about systems that identify and support children living in emergency housing. The responding educators reported that the systems and processes for working with homeless children lacked uniformity across schools (Scanlon & McKenna, 2018). Educators also identified a need to focus on the emotional well-being of children experiencing homelessness before addressing educational needs, as well as the hesitance of parents/whānau to inform the school about their homelessness, which was attributed to social stigma and feelings of shame (Scanlon & McKenna, 2018). Finally, this research identified that significant barriers to educational achievement and participation were due to basic needs not being met, such as lack of sleep and insufficient food (Scanlon & McKenna, 2018).

In Australia, Thielking et al. (2017) investigated secondary school educators' perspectives on youth homelessness and its impact on education. They found that educators could become aware of a student's homelessness or impending homelessness through the school's student population or through disclosure by the individual (Thielking et al., 2017). Furthermore, they identified that positive relationships between educators and whānau could serve as a means of disclosure (Thielking et al., 2017). Finally, this research found that educators believed strengthening relationships between support agencies and schools, as well as between students and agencies, would facilitate better communication (Thielking et al., 2017).

I was unable to locate any published research on educator perspectives regarding the impact of homelessness in educational spaces in the Aotearoa context. This is a gap in the current knowledge base.

2.9 Rationale and focus for this research

As described earlier in this chapter, homelessness is recognised as an adverse childhood experience (ACE), which has the potential to negatively impact the physical, social, and emotional well-being and educational engagement and achievement of a child,

the effects of which continue through into adulthood (Asmundson & Afifi, 2019; Mersky et al., 2017; Sheffler et al., 2019; Zarse, 2019).

Primary school educators work closely with children and their whānau for much of the year through due to compulsory enrolment in education. In Aotearoa, the community engagement and hauora aspects of the education system (Ministry of Education, 2024a; Ministry of Education, 2024b) create an environment in which ongoing connections with children and whānau are established and maintained as part of professional expectations. However, there is limited research into educators' perspectives on the implications of childhood homelessness for educational spaces, particularly research that focuses on the lived experiences of educators working with children and their whānau within the education system. This research begins to address this gap through engaging in conversations to capture and share the experiences and perspectives of primary and intermediate school educators in Aotearoa.

Information and insights that are important to gain through this research include but are not limited to the following:

- What, if any, effects educators see regarding homelessness and children's ability to maintain consistent attendance at their preferred school
- What, if any, impacts educators identify on educational achievement in children experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness
- What, if any, impact working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness has on classroom and school communities
- What, if any, impact working with homeless children and whānau has on the roles and responsibilities of educators in Aotearoa schools
- How childhood homelessness is being addressed in education spaces
- What supports are available to educators in Aotearoa to guide their work with children and whānau experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness

Understanding the connection between an educator's work and childhood homelessness through gaining these insights is a fundamental building block for the overall research required to shape understanding and develop effective policies and professional capabilities in the Aotearoa education workforce. Given the sensitive nature of experiencing childhood adversity, an initial step towards adding to the knowledge

regarding the impact of childhood homelessness must involve speaking with education professionals who interact with children and whānau regularly (Smart, 2018). Gaining educators' perspectives and knowledge capitalises on the dominant social construct that regards educators as trustworthy individuals with whom children and whānau feel comfortable sharing their experiences (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2011).

2.9.1 Research Questions

1. What are educators' experiences of supporting and working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness?
2. Who and what are educators interacting with in their work to support children and whānau impacted by homelessness?

Having built on the foundation of the existing literature and identified the gaps, the following chapter outlines the methodology used to plan and implement this research.

3 Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

Research, if it is to be of value and add to the knowledge base of a topic area or discipline, must be undertaken with careful thought and consideration to every aspect of the study. This chapter therefore begins by identifying the paradigm within which this research is situated. I then introduce and justify the methodology chosen to carry out the research. After clearly outlining my researcher positionality, I describe the roles that educators can hold in educational contexts. Here, I discuss the responsibilities of school leaders and classroom educators, as well as the various roles that non-educator trusted adults can take on in schools. I then describe the educator recruitment process and introduce the educator participants before outlining the data collection method, specifically, the semi-structured interviews. I follow this up by explaining the role of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory (EST) in structuring the analysis, as well as the use of thematic analysis (TA) and narrative analysis (NA) methods to interpret and present the findings. I also outline the ethical considerations of this research, including the right to confidentiality, data storage and accessibility, and reporting the research. I conclude this chapter by discussing trustworthiness and its consideration throughout this research.

3.2 Research Paradigm

This research is situated within the constructivist paradigm, which is based on the ontological belief that individuals create reality through processing their experiences and interactions within their social/whānau groups (Adom et al., 2016). The paradigm is also rooted in the epistemological understanding that it is the interpretation of reality that is used to identify key insights, build knowledge, and develop meaning (Ackermann, 2001; Adom et al., 2016; Pilarska, 2021).

The constructivist paradigm was appropriate for this research as it provided the ontological and epistemological foundation for the study’s aim: to capture the educators’ perspectives on their lived experiences, as they perceived and processed them, while

working in their learning environments with children and whānau who are homeless. Furthermore, the constructivist paradigm is also compatible with the aspect of the research that asked participating educators and to share their perspectives on possible supports that would help educators working with children and whānau who are experiencing homelessness, cope with the effects seen in educational spaces and impact education experiences. The participants' perspectives provided valuable insights, which lay the groundwork for examining how homelessness affects the educational experiences and opportunities of children, as well as the impacts of homelessness on classroom communities and the practices and approaches of educators working with these children in Aotearoa.

Educational research projects in many, if not all, instances have people at their heart. The constructivist paradigm is well-suited to provide the underlying framework for privileging the perspectives, voices, and lived experiences of the research participants.

3.3 Methodology

The "oral storytelling traditions of earliest man *[sic]* were narrative inquiries that sought to address questions of meaning and knowing" (Hendry, 2009, p.72), Narrative has consistently been the format in which people developed many insights and understandings (Clandinin et al., 2019; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Hendry, 2009). Narrative inquiry research focuses on the stories of the people in the context being studied (Clandinin et al., 2019). It aims to capture individual participant narratives as these pertain to the topic of interest and to uncover valuable insights and understandings of the topic (Daiute, 2013). As it homes in on the lived experiences and lives of research participants, it can be considered a qualitative research method (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Narrative inquiry focuses on gathering and sharing the stories that people tell to both depict and make meaning of their experiences (Mertova & Webster, 2019). The underpinning philosophy of narrative inquiry is that, at their core, people are "storied"; as such, it is the sharing of stories that shapes a person or a person's understanding of their own and others' experiences (Bell, 2002; Bochner & Riggs, 2014).

Narrative inquiry is theoretically linked to critical theory and phenomenology (J.-H. Kim 2015), and it has evolved over the last 30 years into a methodology that focuses on the experiences of participants (Clandinin, 2006). It gives researchers the "ability to focus on critical life events while, at the same time, exploring holistic views" (Mertova

& Webster, 2019, p. 1). As Mertova and Webster stated (2019), "Narrative is well suited to addressing the complexities and subtleties of human experience" (p. 13). That is, as a research methodology, narrative inquiry allows researchers to gain understanding and insight into the lived experiences of different populations within broader and more complex societal contexts (J.-H. Kim, 2015).

These aspects of narrative inquiry align with the participant selection and aims of this research project, which gathers educator perspectives based on their experiences in educational sites, to understand the impacts of working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Therefore, narrative inquiry is well-suited to focus on the experiences and perspectives of educators.. This project aimed to gain an understanding of and insight into the lived experiences and perspectives of educators working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness.

When considering the choice of methodology, I also sought to find a methodology that would be responsive to the cultural identities and contexts of the participants. This research was conducted in Aotearoa, and Māori children are four times more likely to experience some form of homelessness (Amore et al., 2021; Statistics NZ, 2024). Storytelling and narrative are essential components of te ao Māori, particularly in making sense of the world and the situations and experiences a person may encounter. This study was not conducted under the Kaupapa Māori research paradigm, as the educators in Aotearoa encompass a diverse range of cultures and ethnicities, and the homeless population in Aotearoa is also broader than Māori alone. The research sought to capture this diversity. However, the study was informed by elements of the Kaupapa Māori methodology through the process of selecting a culturally responsive research method. Narrative inquiry also closely aligns with the core elements of Kaupapa Kōrero, a method within the Kaupapa Māori research paradigm (Ware et al., 2018). Storytelling, in both oral and written forms, and narrative have continued to hold a prominent place in the way people from cultures worldwide share and make sense of their experiences (Mertova & Webster, 2019). Therefore, narrative inquiry was appropriate to the Indigenous cultural backdrop of the Aotearoa context, and it also enabled sensitivity to individual participants' personal cultural identities.

3.4 Researcher Positionality

When undertaking research, the researcher must understand their own position within the context of their knowledge, beliefs, values, and experiences in relation to the research topic (Bourke, 2014; Corlett & Mavin, 2018; Holmes, 2020; Rinchen et al., 2025). Holmes (2020) asserted that the “worldview” of a person is made up of their “ontological [and] epistemological assumptions” combined with their “assumptions about human nature and agency” (p. 1). Understanding these assumptions in a researcher’s own identity and way of interacting with the world enables the examination and identification of the values and beliefs that inform their perceptions and interpretations of various information sources (Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020). Taking the time to identify the assumptions, values, and beliefs that influenced my perception and understanding of the research topic, process, and data was an essential step in this study’s methodology. It was therefore crucial that I acknowledged my lived experiences of childhood and whānau homelessness, as well as my work as an educator in Aotearoa. In this section, I describe these experiences; acknowledge and reflect on biases, values, and beliefs that could have unintentionally impacted the findings if left unexamined; and explain my processes for managing these influences if required.

I have both English and Māori heritage/whakapapa. One of the key aspects that impacted my childhood was housing. My childhood was filled with frequent moves, mostly related to housing instability, with a short period of homelessness following a significant earthquake. My experiences moving every year or so between the ages of 7 and 12 years, and joining and leaving multiple school communities, are part of the lens through which I perceive and understand both housing instability and educational engagement. My experience of homelessness in childhood motivated me to focus my research on gathering the stories of educators who worked in the primary and intermediate school sector with children aged between 8 and 13 years of age.

I have also experienced homelessness as an adult and parent. This experience was marked by stress and embarrassment alongside a fear of judgment. Logically, my husband and I knew we had not done anything wrong, but that did not change the fact that we were reluctant to tell people in our lives we did not have a home to move into. We did not want to face pity or potential judgment, but we could not hide the reality of having all our belongings, five people, and two dogs packed across two cars for 4 weeks (Figure 2) as

we drove between towns to stay in short-term rentals waiting until the new rental home we had found was available to move into.

Figure 2

One of Our Cars Packed with Belongings and Dogs

While it seems incongruous, we were actually fortunate that our experience of homelessness coincided with the summer break, so we did not have to navigate getting our children to and from school. In the middle of the school term, it would likely have been impossible to hide the fact that we were hopping between houses with our belongings in our cars, or to find short-term "holiday" rentals near the school. Through reflection, I have come to understand the power of internalised stigma that resulted from these experiences with societal structures and prevailing opinions. These experiences with homelessness cannot be separated from me as a person, and they also motivated this research. While I have experienced homelessness first-hand as a child, an adult, and a parent, I was not seeking to undertake research that replicated or mirrored my experience, nor do I assert this gives me insight into the range and depth of other people's experiences of homelessness. However, my experience and ongoing learning have led me to understand that there is no single story of homelessness and that trying to navigate homelessness while keeping children in school (a lived experience I do not have) adds another layer to an already stressful situation.

From a professional perspective, I have also worked with children and whānau experiencing homelessness. I am a fully registered teacher in Aotearoa, and I work predominantly in relatively small primary schools (rolls of 200 or less) in the same geographical region. There have been many years when I lost and gained students due to homelessness, and I witnessed the resulting impact on children's engagement and attendance at school, as well as their behaviour and their relationships with their peers and the adults around them. I saw some bright, settled children transition into children with very low confidence. Other children came into my classroom for the first time and struggled to find a sense of belonging, and they expressed their wish to return to the place they had lived before. Despite my best efforts to support these children, I saw and heard how hurt they felt from the loss of their homes. This experience also motivated my research, as I recognised the importance of understanding the breadth of experiences and the impacts on educators working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness. I was also mindful of ensuring that conversations with educators were structured to privilege each of their perspectives and their stories, not to mention the experiences that informed them.

Being part of the educator group identified and recruited for participation in this research positioned me as an insider (Berkovic et al., 2020; Rinchen et al., 2025). Being an insider did not play an overt role in recruitment, as none of the participants were known to me, nor I to them, prior to engaging in the research; however, my identity as an experienced primary school educator offered some advantages. During data collection, one of these advantages involved the "equalized relationship" (Berkovic, 2020, p.1) between me and the participants. I was not a member of their educational site, nor did I hold a position that was above or below them; these factors allowed for an open conversation and helped establish my credibility with regard to hearing and reporting on the information shared (Berkovic, 2020). Using semi-structured interviews helped me establish a rapport with the participants, thus facilitating the sharing of experiences and perspectives (Rinchen et al., 2025). My Māori whakapapa also played a role in the interviews, particularly with Māori participants who expressed comfort in sharing their perspectives to a Māori educator who was researching a social issue in which Māori children and whānau are over-represented.

Understanding and acknowledging my identity was also essential in the analysis phase due to my particular understanding of and connections to the language used, as well

as the experiences, beliefs and perspectives expressed (Berkovic et al., 2020). I revisited the videos and read the transcripts as part of my “reflexive analysis” (Rinchen et al., 2025). I reflected on the way I had phrased questions, where a particular phrasing or topic originated, and the information I shared with the participant during the conversation. Throughout this process, I focused on prioritising the possible influence I might have had on participants while they were sharing their perspectives and experiences. I made a point of exploring and discussing my relationship with the research area in regular conversations with my supervisors (Corlett & Mavin, 2018). This helped me identify whether I was inadvertently applying my own perspective or overlooking key aspects of the data, and it also enabled me to keep the analysis focused on the experiences and stories shared by the educators.

Finally, this research often involved conversations about traumatic experiences or events, including abuse, sudden loss of a parent due to death, or severe emotional distress. It was not until I had completed my first interview that I understood the potential for this study to have a negative emotional impact on me (Fenge et al., 2019). I found that revisiting the recordings and transcripts of the interviews took an emotional toll I had not anticipated and that I needed to work through in professional conversations (Fenge et al., 2019). I also spoke to my supervisors about the interviews and kept a private audio log of my thoughts and feelings, which I recorded at the conclusion of each interview.

3.5 Educators

3.5.1 The Roles of Educators in Aotearoa Primary Schools

Educators can take on a several roles in primary schools in Aotearoa. This section outlines the prominent roles registered education professionals may occupy, as well as the roles taken on by trusted non-educator adults.

3.5.2 School Leaders

School leaders include principals, deputy principals, assistant principals, and, in some settings, the special education needs coordinator (SENCO) or learning support coordinator (LSC). The role of principals and the senior leadership team is to oversee the operation of the school, with the principal serving as the key connection between the board of trustees (BOT) and the school staff (Ministry of Education, 2024c). The principal is responsible for appraisals of teaching staff, and the leadership team determines school

processes and protocols, hires and oversees staff across all areas, and liaises with external providers of learning programmes or support and resources, as well as whānau and community members.

School principals and the senior leadership team are also responsible for creating the school's culture — the values that the school upholds and the vision and mission statements that underpin the programmes and direction of the school. Additionally, they are responsible for monitoring, collecting, and reporting student data to government departments that oversee education. The specific duties of members of school leadership teams can vary depending on the school's size, context, and needs.

3.5.3 Classroom educators

Classroom educator roles are multifaceted and encompass a range of responsibilities and expectations (Education Council New Zealand, 2017; Przybylska, 2011). In their 2024 report titled *General Areas of Responsibility*, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI; the union for primary school educators, support staff, principals, and specialist staff), included planning for learning, knowing the curriculum, delivering the content and curriculum in the learning space, understanding appropriate pedagogies, being able to teach through inquiry, and being able to utilise a range of assessment methods, as well as monitoring and reporting assessment data and using that data to evaluate teaching and learning programmes that are included in classroom educators' roles and responsibilities. Classroom educators must understand how to differentiate the delivery of the curriculum in ways that ensure that they are meeting the requirements of children with diverse learning needs (Antia, 1999; Education Council New Zealand, 2017; NZEI, 2024). Educators also have a duty of care for learners that encompasses their physical, social, spiritual, and emotional well-being (Education Council New Zealand, 2017; NZEI, 2024; Rudling et al., 2023). And there is an expectation that educators will be culturally responsive in their teaching practice.

Classroom educators may also have different management units within the school that come with a level of leadership in a particular area (NZEI, 2024). These roles are outside the official leadership team and can include leading a specific curriculum area, such as health and physical education or te ao Māori. Classroom educators also have health and safety roles; they hold a current first aid certificate and are expected to be able to recognise and report any safety hazards they may observe (NZEI, 2024).

There is a strong emphasis on classroom educators building relationships through communication and collaboration with learners and whānau, local iwi, and interested community groups; this is referred to as the “community engagement principle” (Ministry of Education, 2024a). It is therefore acknowledged that, while care for the physical and mental–emotional well-being of children will occur primarily during the time they are physically present in the learning space and educational site, educators are likely to extend this care beyond the school and into the children’s personal lives (NZEI, 2024). Due to these relationships, educators may observe behaviour changes that lead to conversations with whānau, which can in turn lead to engagement with other organisations as part of educators’ pastoral care duties (Bishop & Rigney, 2023; NZEI, 2024).

3.5.4 Other Trusted Adults

Alongside qualified and registered education professionals, schools employ other adults to provide extra support across a range of areas. The roles that these trusted adults take on include, but are not limited to, learning assistants, office administrators, librarians, counsellors/social workers, and sports coaches. All adults working with children in schools are required to undergo police vetting to ensure they meet the safety requirements for protecting vulnerable children in the school setting (Ministry of Education, 2024c).

3.6 Educator Recruitment

Ethics permission for this research was sought and obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato under application HREC(Health)2021#90. Further information about the ethical considerations for this research is discussed in section 3.8.

Given there are adults in a range of educator roles in any one school, recruitment information for this study was sent to schools with a request that it be shared with the leadership team and classroom teachers. I took this approach because my experience as a classroom educator was that students’ housing information was known to key staff members. However, despite my having multiple contacts within the education sector, including classroom educators and school leaders, recruiting educator participants proved to be a challenging task.

I began by sending an introductory email, followed by a follow-up phone call to schools in the region I was located, as the network of schools was familiar and were within

a two-hour drive, thus facilitating face-to-face meetings if needed. One of the principals who was contacted this way returned the phone call and advised me that the school did not have any children "who are homeless." I received one return email that expressed the same sentiment. While I knew, from local organisations, that this was not accurate, I thanked the people for their time and did not make another approach. I then approached people further out in my personal and professional networks. I posted on my professional social media profiles, sharing information about the research and asking people to share it with educators. This garnered six responses, which translated into four educator interviews. I repeated these steps, with no further responses. I then sent emails to schools whose principals had given media interviews about the rising number of whānau in their communities living in emergency housing, and I requested that the information about my research be shared with the educators. One school responded to say that the information would not be shared and the school would not be participating. These experiences indicated that some educators did not understand the range of living conditions that fall under the umbrella of homelessness in Aotearoa (Statistics NZ, 2015); I also got the impression that some school leaders may be concerned about negative conclusions being made about their school, staff, or community if they were to speak about the experiences they had working with children experiencing homelessness.

A final push was made to recruit educators. While the information remained the same, the format changed from a PDF attachment to a short Google Forms link in the email body. I used the Education Counts (2024) "New Zealand Schools: Schools Directory Builder" to extract contact information for primary, intermediate, and area schools in Aotearoa. I sent out the new email format, including the link, to over 2200 schools. From these emails, I received two replies from principals who said they did not have any homeless students, four school administrators replied that they could not pass on the information, and 16 educators completed the form to sign up to participate in the research. Of the 16 responses, 11 followed through to the interview stage. Across the three rounds of recruitment, a total of 15 educators completed interviews and participated in this research. Educators provided their consent via a Google form created for recruitment purposes (see Section 3.8 for further details).

Alongside educators, schools have other adults working with the children. For this research, recruitment information was sent to schools to be shared with the leadership team and classroom teachers. Along with the trained and registered educators, one non-

teaching staff member responded to the recruitment information and participated in an interview. The non-teaching participant occupied a child-facing role. Their experiences working with children and educators in the school setting provided a relevant perspective on the impact of childhood homelessness in educational settings, as seen in environments outside the formal learning space. After discussing this with my supervisors, we concluded that the interview and transcript of the non-teaching participant could be included in the dataset. For the purposes of this research, all members of the participant cohort are referred to as "educators."

3.6.1 Meet the Participants

The participating educators came from a range of educational contexts and roles within schools. The contexts included an area school (Years 0–13), six full primary schools (Years 0–8), and five contributing primary schools (Years 0–6). One educator was from an intermediate school (Years 7–8). One of the full primary school educators worked at an iwi-affiliated special character school, and one educator worked in a special school that catered to children and young people aged from 5 to 21 years old with severe disabilities. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and general characteristics were used to describe their educational contexts in an effort to maintain anonymity. Table 1 introduces each participant.

Table 1
Participants

Participant	Position	School type	Location type	Roll size (approx.)
Kelly	Reading recovery educator	Contributing primary	Urban – large city	220
Huia	Principal	Full primary	Mid-sized coastal town	80
Whetu	Classroom educator	Contributing primary	Urban – large city	320
Marilyn	Principal	Full primary	Rural – small town	130
Rhonda	Deputy principal	Special school Yr 0 to age 21	Urban – large city	180
Melissa	Learning support coordinator	Full primary	Semi-rural – medium sized town	220
Lydia	Librarian	Full primary	Semi-rural – medium sized town	365
Moana	Deputy principal	Contributing primary	Medium-sized town	500
Theresa	Classroom educator	Area School Yr 0–13	Rural – small town	125
Anaru	Principal	Full primary	Urban - small city	180
Ken	Deputy principal	Intermediate	Semi-rural – medium-sized town	450
Miriam	Classroom educator	Contributing primary	Urban – small city	500
Brooke	Classroom educator	Contributing primary	Urban – large town	500
Whina	Classroom educator	Full primary	Semi-rural – medium-sized town	300
Hinemoa	Learning support coordinator	Special character iwi school – full primary	Semi-rural – large town	300

3.7 Data collection

This research employed semi-structured conversations with educators to generate data.

3.7.1 Semi-Structured Conversations

In narrative inquiry, it is common for researchers to collect the stories and experiences of participants through interviews (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I have chosen to frame the dialogue during the data collection sessions with the educators as semi-structured conversations because I used a list of questions and prompts to guide the conversation through the topics to be discussed. The list of questions and prompts was made available to educators who requested them before their scheduled conversation. Only one educator requested to see the list in advance. Educators provided their consent via a Google form created for recruitment purposes.

The educator interviews were conducted via Zoom video calls and were scheduled at times determined by the participants (Wahl-Jorgenson, 2021). Zoom was selected as the interview method for several reasons. First, it allowed for the recording of both video and audio content within the platform, and the recording could be immediately saved to a secure location within OneDrive, making it available for analysis after the interview had ended. The second reason Zoom was used was its accessibility to educators, participants could take part in the interviews from anywhere in the country, which removed a potential barrier to participation that in-person interviews would have caused (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020; Oliffe et al., 2021; Wahl-Jorgenson, 2021). The use of Zoom was effective overall. Two participants were impacted by technical issues that required on-the-spot troubleshooting to allow the conversation to continue.

As an educator myself, I have an understanding of the time constraints that educators and school leaders face during the school term. As a result, the educator's data was collected through a single interview. Although the recruitment information stated that the interviews would be approximately 60 minutes long, the actual interview length ranged from 60 to 120 minutes, depending on the educator, the information they had to share, and their available time. I also utilised the OTTER.AI transcription service to join each Zoom interview, generate an audio-only recording, create key points and a keyword overview, and produce a transcript for use in the analysis. These were also saved to the OneDrive folder with the Zoom recording and the participant consent forms. I reviewed the transcripts and matched them with the audio recordings to clarify statements if I suspected the transcription had not accurately captured the words (this was usually due to the use of te reo Māori).

3.7.2 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a well-known form of analysis in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2012). TA is not specific to a single epistemological approach or research paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Joffe, 2011), and it has been identified as an effective method in research using social constructivism as a theoretical lens (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016). As TA is designed for working with qualitative data, it is particularly well-suited to data that comes from interviews (Joffe, 2011). Using TA enables the researcher to gain key insights and understandings into the topic being researched (Swain, 2018).

TA was the appropriate choice for making sense of educator perspectives, given that they were generated through semi-structured interviews. This method provided the structure and nuance necessary to work with the educator data set, and it enabled me to still privilege the voices of educators by identifying and reproducing their statements within the themes and findings.

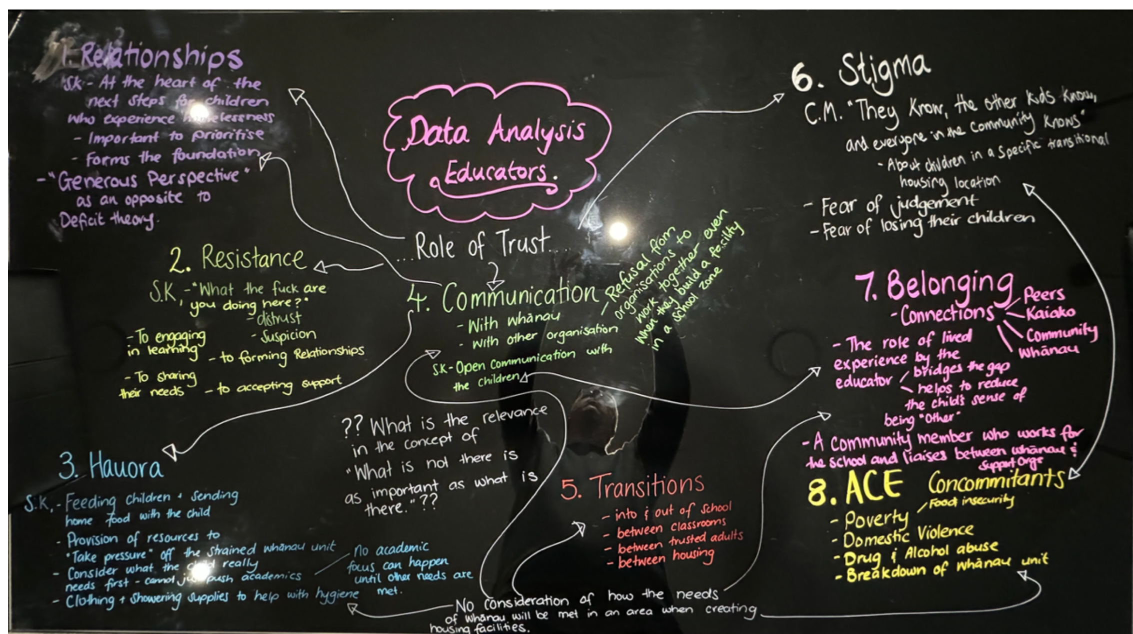
TA involves "systematically identifying, organising, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). More specifically, Braun and Clarke (2012) identified "six phases in the approach to TA" (p. 60). They labelled the six phases as (i) familiarising yourself with the data, (ii) generating the initial codes, (iii) searching for themes, (iv) reviewing potential themes, (v) defining and naming themes, and (vi) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

The first phase, familiarising myself with the data, involved revisiting the data multiple times through both reading the transcripts and rewatching and/or relistening to video or audio recordings. This process involved considering the content of the data, as well as any notes and observations I had made during or shortly after the initial data collection. I revisited the data multiple times to "highlight items potentially of interest" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60). This was also the phase in which I began to examine the data more critically and to frame questions that inquired into the lens through which a participant presented their experiences. This process involved noting any assumptions that participants made known and how these may have influenced the way they interpreted their own experiences when recounting events (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Generating initial codes involved creating a coding system that was then used to identify patterns present in the data at each subsequent review. Braun and Clarke (2012) referred to the codes as the "building blocks of analysis" (p. 61). The coding was done

through becoming familiar with the data, identifying patterns that emerged and were present across the dataset, and noting any significant features. Codes can be heavily tied to the specific wording in the data, known as descriptive coding (Braun & Clarke, 2012), and this form of coding was applied in this analysis. A key aspect of the coding was that, initially, the ideas were not thoroughly explained; rather, they served as a shorthand in the analysis and in my conversations with the supervision team. TA was appropriate as it relies on the researcher having a strong understanding of and familiarity with the context in which the data has been collected, as well as the content, especially for codes based on interpretation. Using codes made the data organisation more manageable (Joffe, 2011). For me, this process began as a colour-coded physical mind map on a large tabletop, upon which I recorded codes identified through highlighting in the transcripts.

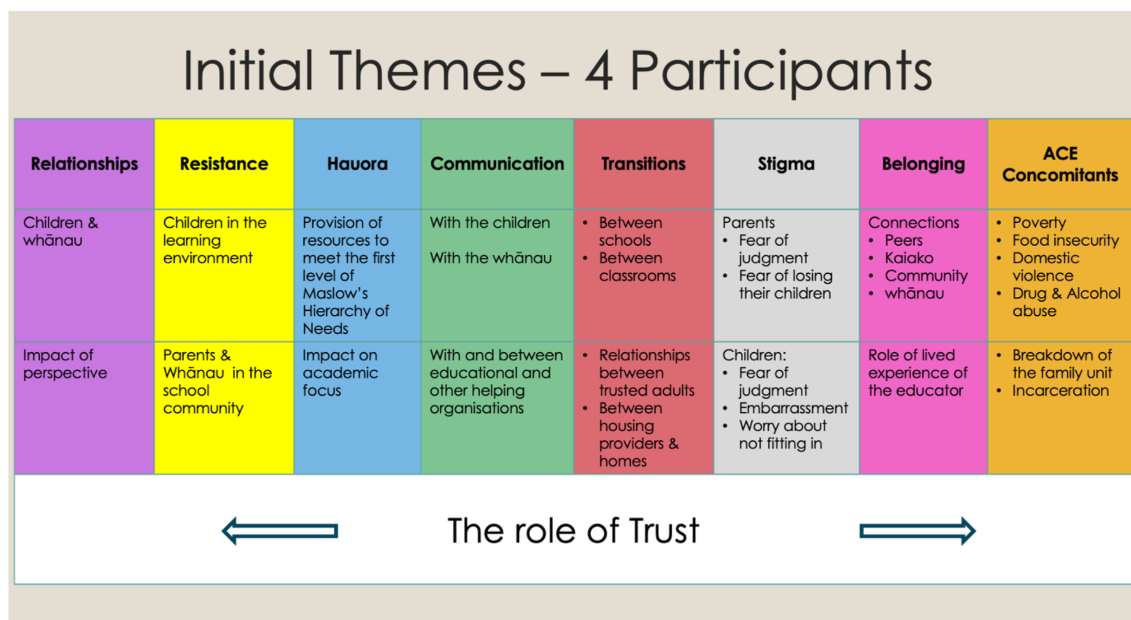
Figure 3
Initial Coding



Searching for themes began once coding was complete. In this phase of the analysis process, codes move to themes, and this was an "active process" through which I sought to "generate or construct themes" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). I decided on each theme to highlight and encapsulate "something important about the data in relation to the research question" and to represent "some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 82). To ensure the rigour of this process, I reviewed the coded data with my supervisors. Identifying codes that "share[d] some unifying feature together" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63) by virtue of their similarities, overlaps, or repetitions became the basis for identifying themes.

At this point in the analysis, the proposed themes were examined in the context of the initial codes and the data set as a whole. Braun and Clarke (2012) referred to this as a form of quality control. They viewed the process as essential, given that, in qualitative research, it is entirely unlikely that a researcher can recall all aspects of the data set off the top of their head. At this stage, the themes were cross-checked with the codes to build an understanding of whether each theme was effective within the context of the dataset, and any themes that were not relevant were identified for removal. Some themes were ultimately collapsed into a single theme or a newly constructed theme. To further confirm the relevance of the themes, participant interviews were revisited and underwent initial coding to gain an understanding of what, if any, common ideas were present. Once this had been done, four participant interviews were chosen at random to begin identifying themes. In the initial stages, the coding resulted in eight themes (represented below in Figure 4). These themes were then applied to the coding from the remaining data, and rearranged, collapsed, or dropped as further analysis progressed. This was achieved through regular discussions with my supervisors, which involved querying and critically examining the themes as they evolved to ensure that they were ultimately representative of the dataset.

Figure 4
Initial Themes with Coding Identifiers



Defining and naming the themes occurs at the point when "quality control" has been completed and the researcher can clearly and simply articulate the key points of a

theme in a few simple phrases. This process essentially ensures that the theme has a name and explanation that conveys its essence. Braun and Clarke (2012) stated that

> A good thematic analysis will have themes that (a) do not try to do too much, as themes should ideally have a singular focus; (b) are related but do not overlap, so they are not repetitive, although they may build on previous themes; and (c) directly address your research question. (p. 66)

Ultimately, the purpose of this phase is to ensure that the analysis has yielded a clear and coherent "story" from the critical and considered interpretation of the data. This phase also ensures that each theme can be distinguished from the other. In this study, defining and naming the themes involved identifying key phrases in the data that could be used to represent key findings in the participants' own words. This identification of statements continued as the time approached to move to the final phase of producing the findings.

The production of the findings occurred throughout the analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Ultimately, the purpose of the findings is to tell the story of the data, developed through analysis, in a way that is compelling and robust. In my case, consistent with recommendations, this process also involved deciding on an order for the themes that cumulated effectively. The order was chosen to ensure that the insights built upon themes that had come before and also provided a foundation for the themes to come, thereby ensuring they all came together at the end.

3.7.2.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory as a Framework for Analysis: Justification and Integration

Based on the interactions between themes and different layers of the school and wider community, I chose to use Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1979; 2000) as a guide. I am deliberately introducing Bronfenbrenner and EST here, in the data analysis section, because of the complexity and multiplicity of the interconnections that became more evident through the data analysis process. EST is often used as a framework for understanding childhood development through interactions in various environments (see Amali et al., 2023; Antony, 2022; Crawford et al., 2020; Doyle, 2013; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Paat, 2013). However, research studies have applied EST to place adults at the centre of the EST model (see Dobson & Douglas, 2020; Wilder & Jordan, 2009). As the analysis began to highlight the interactions and interconnections between themes,

and the application of EST in research with adults at the centre was explored further, it became clear that the use of EST in the structuring of findings from data analysis and discussion was supported. As such, EST was used to organise the findings that emerged from data analysis. The model first placed educators, their roles, and personal lived experiences at the centre. With the themes that emerged from the analysis of the educators' interviews, a model of the ecosystem, named Educators Ecological Systems for this study, within which the educators operated, was created to scaffold the analysis and develop an understanding of when, where, and to whom a theme was emerging. The next level focused on the relationships and interactions between the educator and the child. The third level expanded to include the interactions and relationships between the educator and whānau. The fourth level encompasses interactions between educators, their colleagues, and the school community (including other staff and specialists with involvement in the school, such as SWiS and resource educators). The fifth level addressed the educators' relationships or interactions with local community organisations, businesses, and iwi. These first five levels focused on answering Research Question 1. The sixth and final level of the model addressed interactions and relationships with systems, agencies, and non-governmental support organisations. Aspects of the fifth level, and the entirety of the sixth level answered Research Question 2.

Figure 5

Educator Ecological Systems Model Developed Through Analysis

3.7.3 Thematic Analysis, Narrative Analysis, and the Justification of Small Stories

Once the thematic data analysis was complete, I revisited the transcripts to identify and select quotes to illustrate the themes in the results chapter. For some themes and sub-themes, there were quotes that clearly articulated a single point. These are enclosed in quotation marks in Chapter 4. However, educators frequently responded to my questions by relating a story about a particular event, child, and/or action they had taken. These stories were multifaceted, illustrating the complex and interdependent nature of educator views, experiences, and actions. This required developing an approach that maintained a sense of the complexity of their view in relation to a theme, rather than fragmenting it. I needed a strategy that enabled me to collate and present educator findings in a way that kept the sophistication of their perspectives and experiences at the centre. Ultimately, exploring NA led me to the notion of mega-narratives and small stories (Olson & Craig, 2009).

Crafting the small stories involved blending TA and the NA tools of broadening and burrowing (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). The themes that emerged from TA served as a form of "broadening" (understanding the generalised characteristics) by identifying the overarching commonalities across the participant interviews (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11). Olson and Craig (2009) asserted that broadening a dataset can yield mega-narratives. In their research into "ways in which teachers and students live in small moments of diversity unseen and unheard within prevailing mega-narratives of accountability" (p. 547), they stated that mega-narratives (such as educational policy and organisational structures) represent canonical knowledge or ideas that have an "unchallenged acceptance" (Olson & Craig, 2009, p. 553). With regard to "burrowing," Connelly and Clandinin (1990) defined it as "reconstructing a story of the event from the point of view of the person" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.11). Olson and Craig (2009) discussed the use of small stories as a form of burrowing that attends to the lived experiences of teachers and students—their tensions, emotions, and relationships—which are often overlooked or invisible. Olson and Craig (2009) also acknowledged the interplay between small stories or "petite plot lines with mega-narratives" (p. 553).

In the analysis and reporting of this study, the themes served as mega-narratives, and condensed recounting from the educators' interviews, scripted from their point of view, were shaped into small stories. The small stories are italicised and indented in Chapter 4. Educator interview stories have been edited to focus on the relevant theme and to remove any potentially identifying features. Table 1 includes an example of original interview data and the small story crafted from it. The example is included to illustrate my commitment to honouring the educator's commentary within the condensed "small" story in a way that also highlights its connection to the mega-narrative (theme). It is included as evidence of trustworthiness in the data analysis and small story crafting.

Table 2
Example of Construction of a Small Story from Participant Interview Data

Original Data Snippet from the "Relationships" Theme	Small Story
When I'm interviewing, I look for relationship based. Our children won't learn if they don't have a relationship with their teacher, with their TAs, even, even my admin, you know, she plays a really important role. And Oh, we so we had this child who came to our school and was under a table for nine months at the other schools. So she trashed the school like this. That's how unsafe she felt. She was under a table she'd and I said to the teacher, leave her there when we can't teach her, pushing her against the wall or forcing her do something is not going to work. And I and I was challenged, right? You know, I have been challenged for some of my ways of doing things. Well, the next year, she came out from under that table, and she was learning, and she's at her where her peers are. But once, once you got it out from under the table, one of the aspects was, if it got too much for her, she'd go up to the admin. And my admin just had a couple of jobs she could help her, and it would give her enough time to calm down go back to class. So, we, we taught her to self-monitor what's going on for her inside in a safe way, um, you know. So that's, that's that part, you know. So, my admins like, I'm supposed to be doing my job and all that, I was like, but this is part of your job. You know, because we care, all of us care about our kids. We never say to someone that's your class, you deal with it. They're all of ours, and we all support each other.	*The child spent a lot of lesson time under a classroom table and would "trash the school" if they were made to come out from under it. Marilyn eventually advised the classroom educator to let the child stay under a table, saying her perspective was that "we can't teach her, pushing her against the wall or forcing her do something is not going to work." Marilyn said that when she gave this advice to the educator, she also challenged herself to examine her "ways of doing things." The next year, Marilyn shared, the child "came out from under that table, and she was learning, and she's at where her peers are" because the educators had worked with the child to develop their ability to "self-monitor" and had an environment where school staff acted in ways that showed they cared.*

3.8 Ethical Considerations

As signalled in section 3.6, ethics for this research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Waikato under the code HREC(Health)2021#90. The ethical considerations involved the participants' right to privacy, confidentiality, and informed consent. It also covered data storage and accessibility, how the research may be reported once completed, and cultural awareness in research conducted in Aotearoa.

3.8.1 Participants' Right to Privacy, Confidentiality, and Informed Consent

I cannot guarantee the complete anonymity of the participants because, besides myself as the researcher, other individuals (such as the school staff and whānau members of the participants) may have some knowledge of who is participating. This is because (1) the initial information given to prospective participants may have come through their colleagues or workplace, and (2) the data collection for educators was conducted online, so the location of their interview and any other person present as they completed their interview was outside of my control.

To ensure that the participants were fully informed as to the purpose of the research, what time commitment would be involved, and the topics that may be covered, a comprehensive information sheet was provided. The participants returned the completed and signed form to confirm their consent to be interviewed for this research. Their informed consent was reaffirmed during the process of confirming interview details, and each participant was invited to ask any clarifying questions regarding the information sheet and consent form at the beginning of their interview. Additionally, the conversation prompts that were used to support the progress of the interviews were available to the participants upon request, which was clearly explained in the information sheet. Making these available upon request was to support participants to feel fully informed as to the types of questions or prompts that could be used during their interview if they wanted that information, while also ensuring that the participants did not feel that they were required to cover all of the questions or limited to only answering those questions.

3.8.2 Storage and Accessibility of Data

I used a unique alphanumeric code to protect the anonymity of the educators in the datasets. This code was linked to a participant profile, which was stored digitally in a password-protected file that was accessible only to me as the researcher.

Participants were clearly informed that the conversations and information I recorded and collected during the research sessions would not be made available to anyone besides themselves, me, and my supervision team.

3.8.3 Reporting the Research

When writing up the analysis from the collected data, I used pseudonyms that were assigned to the data once collection had been completed. When reporting the research, I endeavoured to protect the confidentiality of what was said during the sessions with participants by not disclosing their statements in a way that allowed anyone to personally identify who made a particular statement.

3.8.4 Cultural Awareness and Ethics

I am a bi-cultural woman, affiliated to the iwi Te Aitanga a Mahaki. Throughout my teaching career, I have regularly been responsible for shaping te ao Māori strategic plans for schools by drawing on my personal knowledge of tikanga, whakawhanaungatanga, and kaupapa Māori. As almost all my teaching career has been spent in the Waikato and connected to Tainui iwi, I have worked with iwi-informed organisations regarding cultural responsiveness and added this to my own kete of knowledge. I utilised my own learning and understanding to inform and educate other teaching professionals on how to apply the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and culturally responsive practice in their work with children.

As a fully registered educator, I am required to understand and uphold the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and demonstrate cultural responsiveness in my own practice. This remains true whether I am teaching in the classroom or working with other educators or children as part of my research, and it is a responsibility I took seriously throughout this research.

3.9 Trustworthiness

An important consideration when undertaking and presenting qualitative research is the issue of trustworthiness (Krefting, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Loh, 2013; Stahl & King, 2020). Ensuring that this research was conducted in a trustworthy manner involved several steps pertaining to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability

The first step taken to build trustworthiness into the research related to the collection of the data. The interviews were recorded in both video and audio, and transcripts were created to accompany each recording. The recordings and transcripts were stored digitally in a folder for each participant, which guaranteed that each interview was clearly identifiable to the researcher (Loh, 2013). Ensuring that the information shared by the participants was captured accurately allowed the dataset to remain true to the original interviews when it was time to begin analysis.

The next step towards maximising trustworthiness was the use of peer validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Loh, 2013). For this research, my supervisors occupied the role of peers. One of my supervisors was an experienced education researcher, and the other had expertise in researching childhood homelessness. As this research encompassed both educational contexts and experiences of homelessness, my supervisors were well placed to "have some familiarity with the relevant research literature, research methods, and would have engaged in similar research work" (Loh, 2013, p. 6). Given their knowledge and experience in their fields, my supervisors were able to ask critical and clarifying questions as well as being "able to provide some sort of corroboration with regard to the interpretation of the data" (Loh, 2013, p.6). This meant that discussions regarding the analysis and interpretation of the data were robust, considered, and conducted in a manner that was designed to ensure trustworthiness.

Another step towards creating trustworthiness is verisimilitude (Loh, 2013). Throughout the peer validation process, specific stories and quotes were selected from the educator transcripts to justify or illustrate a theme. This led to the blending of TA and NA tools to present participants' recounting of their experiences as "small stories" (Olson & Craig, 2009). The small stories illustrated the themes, but, with regard to verisimilitude, they also provided the opportunity for readers to develop "insights, deepen empathy and sympathy, and aid in the understanding of the subjective world of the participants" (Loh, 2013).

3.10 Conclusion

This research was conducted within the constructivist paradigm and utilised narrative inquiry, TA, NA, and narrative portraiture. Important consideration was given to my own positionality and motivations as a researcher to acknowledge and account for any unconscious bias I may have held before beginning this study. The chosen paradigm, methodology, and analytical methods aimed to centre the participants and ensure the data was interpreted with critical understanding and frequent discussion with knowledgeable researchers. In Chapter 4, I present the findings from the interviews.

4 Chapter 4

Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter focuses on the perceptions and experiences of school-based educators and trusted adults regarding the impact of homelessness on children and whānau. Specifically, it investigates how children's homelessness shaped participants' understandings of their roles as educators. This chapter also shares the opinions of educators regarding what they believe could or should be done to better support children and their whānau when they are experiencing homelessness, as well as to support educators and schools. The chapter is organised into seven key themes: i) the importance of relationships, ii) the need to strengthen the general context of well-being or hauora for educational engagement, iii) the role of communication, iv) perspectives on belongingness for children, v) the role of an educator's lived experience, vi) picking up the slack for systems failures, and vii) tensions between meeting children's educational needs and their emotional needs.

As discussed in Chapter 3, educator names have been changed to maintain their privacy and the privacy of their school communities. Educator views and stories are shared in each section, the latter presented as small stories (see Section 3.7.3). Small stories are represented using italics.

4.2 "Step One Is Relationships"

The importance of relationship building and maintaining positive relationships with learners and their whānau was a consistent message from all participants. Educators emphasised that establishing and maintaining positive relationships is crucial for a child's participation and academic progress. Relationships were also described as important contributors to a child's positive mental and emotional development. However, as children and whānau navigated experiences of homelessness, the development of positive relationships hinged on several factors. These factors included establishing an environment that provided consistency with regard to both place and people, building

trust in the school and individual staff members, and ensuring that the child and their whānau retained their agency and felt empowered in their engagement with the school.

4.2.1 Trust

A key message shared by participants was that positive relationships between educators, children, and whānau are founded on trust. Trusted relationships, according to the educators in this study, do not form spontaneously — they require effort to establish. They are built through clear and reciprocal communication, efforts to understand how children and whānau are feeling, and a willingness to engage in good faith. Trust is reinforced through consistent, respectful, and non-judgmental contact. Participants said that, once it was developed, a trusted relationship with children and their whānau could be maintained by working with them to address the child's learning and developmental needs, including their well-being and behavioural needs. Trust was also built by helping the child feel supported and included in their learning environment, as well as setting and making progress towards their learning goals. These actions were designed to ensure that the time a child (and their whānau) spent in the school environment was positive and productive. Educators noted that forming or maintaining productive relationships could be challenging when there was a lack of trust between the school and the child or whānau.

The educators stated that part of building trust involves following through with or acting in ways that work towards or facilitate positive outcomes for the child or whānau. Hinemoa, Marilyn, Anaru, Melissa, Ken, and Huia all expressed their view that, if a parent or child does not believe that what the educator tells them can be relied upon, then they are less likely to share essential information, participate in conversations, or accept support and/or resources that are offered.

4.2.1.1 Trust as a Fundamental Foundation for Relationships

When discussing relationships, Hinemoa stated, "The other deliberate thing is that when I work with whānau it's about trust in relationships, so I have to have worked with them for a long time before they are going to say, you know, sure … if you say I need to talk to this person and this is a good idea, then I'll do it." This quote emphasises the significance of trust in cultivating genuine, meaningful relationships where whānau are prepared to act on advice. Other educators commented that trust was essential in enabling the school to facilitate connections between whānau and support organisations and

agencies so that whānau could access and receive the support they required to address unmet needs.

4.2.1.2 The Role of Trusting Relationships in Fostering Learning Engagement, Caring Connections, and Achievement

From the educators' perspectives, building trust through consistent interactions and conversations enabled children to feel safe in their learning spaces, thereby facilitating engagement in learning opportunities and progress toward learning goals. Several participants shared the perspective that children will only learn if they have a trusted relationship with their educators, educator aides, and even the administrative staff at a school — that is, with all educators/ adults in a school. Melissa stated, "We really do work very strongly on trying to develop strong relationships and trusting relationships and providing lots of signals of safety to our children so that they can learn."

Marilyn (a primary school principal) shared a story that highlighted the importance of being purposeful in building trust. She described a child who was enrolled in her school after an extended period of homelessness. The information that Marilyn received from the child's previous school was that they had not engaged in the classroom programme and would retreat to sit under a table — behaviours that continued when the child joined their new class. What follows is the first "small story" in this chapter.

> *The child spent a lot of lesson time under a classroom table and would "trash the school" if they were made to come out from under it. Marilyn eventually advised the classroom educator to let the child stay under a table, saying her perspective was that "we can't teach her, pushing her against the wall or forcing her do something is not going to work." Marilyn said that, when she gave this advice to the educator, she also challenged herself to examine her "ways of doing things." The next year, Marilyn shared, the child "came out from under that table, and she was learning, and she's at her, where her peers are" because the educators had worked with the child to develop her ability to "self-monitor" and had an environment where school staff acted in ways that showed they cared.*

Marilyn's interpretation was that the child's behaviour, and her refusal to engage in conversations with staff or her peers, likely demonstrated her lack of trust in the school environment and how unsafe she felt. Therefore, for any school or learning engagement to occur, Marilyn believed that trust had to be built. Marilyn also stated that a key element

in her school, one that was necessary when working with children experiencing homelessness, was that the staff collectively cared about the children. Marilyn clarified this to mean that they would not say to a staff member, "Hey, that's your class; you deal with it." From a school perspective, all the children were "theirs," and the staff supported each other to help the students.

Hinemoa also discussed the need for schools to "create a culture of care," with this concept applying to both staff and children:

> What does that look like? What does that mean? That means if we can practice that with each other first, and we had to do a lot of work around being respectful with each other, because we had patterns in our own behaviour which whānau and children can see, the way we talk to each other, the way we interact. So, you can't really help whānau if you're not helping yourself … So, you know there's still work to do around teachers, knowing that if their culture or values around culture of care, delivering … the school values can't really be implemented if you, yourself as a professional, aren't using that.

Many educators emphasised that it is essential for school staff, leadership, educators, and support staff to collaborate in creating an environment that fosters a positive foundation upon which trust, and positive relationships, can be built.

4.2.1.3 The Role of Trust as a Foundation for Facilitating Support

Several participants discussed trust as playing a vital role in facilitating the provision of resources and support to children and whānau. Marilyn said that part of her work with children experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness was about creating spaces where the children were most important. This involved prioritising the development of trusting relationships and building the children's sense of safety. This concept is described in the following narrative from Marilyn (this story continues in Section 4.2.5 and concludes in Section 4.3.2).

> *Marilyn was attempting to make contact with a whānau due to the repeated absences of the child. She said she was consistently contacting the parent to invite them into school, saying, "Hey, is everything okay? Is there anything we can do?" but to no avail. Eventually, she went to see the parent and told him, "Here are the statistics of your child's attendance, and here are the impacts it's having on [child's] learning progress." Marilyn said the parent initially tried to make*

excuses. However, when he saw and understood the impact of the repeated absences on his child, he eventually opened up about the stress that the housing situation was having on him and how it was affecting him and his child. This conversation marked the beginning of a trusting relationship between Marilyn and the parent. Marilyn allayed his fears that his child would get into trouble for arriving late to school, thereby removing the barrier this fear was causing to attendance.

The following story, shared by Melissa, a learning support coordinator (LSC), was another powerful example of the importance of establishing trusted relationships as part of being able to provide support. This story brings together several key points to illustrate the complexity involved in establishing and maintaining trust:

Melissa spoke about visiting a whānau who had moved into emergency housing. The older children had arrived at the school with the youngest child, an infant, to collect the enrolment forms they needed to start school. When the office staff asked the children where their parents were, the children replied that they were at home, but they would take the forms to them. The office staff raised this as a concern with senior leadership, and it was determined that Melissa would support the whānau through the enrolment process and check if there was anything else they needed.

Melissa rang the parents on the number supplied by the children to arrange a time for them to come into the school, but they failed to attend. Eventually, Melissa and the school's social worker went to the emergency housing motel to meet the whānau, taking with them the backpacks and stationery items that the school provided to new whānau in emergency accommodation. When speaking with the whānau, Melissa discovered the parents were terrified of their children being in school and being visible because of the traumatic circumstances that had led to their homeless, including gang affiliation, police involvement, death threats, and potential retribution. Prior to receiving emergency housing support, this whānau had been living in the bush and in their car to remain hidden. They expressed feelings of ongoing fear and described being used and let down by people and organisations. Melissa explained:

> *They'd been involved in the gangs and the drugs, and the dad was quite open about that. They had been in a situation where they had disclosed*

some information and then there had been retribution against them, and so they had been in hiding and had police support and so on. They'd been living in their car since they left [region] and then they ended up here. And so they were scared about the children being at school, because they'd had threats that the children would be hurt. It just took so much work to build trust and to tell them about the systems that we have.

Melissa had been able to liaise with the police to help ensure that any additional safety measures were in place. The anxiety of the whānau was further compounded because they could not afford uniforms and other school essentials. Alongside the backpacks and stationery, Melissa, through the school and her connections to organisations, provided uniforms for their children. She connected the whānau with the public health nurse so they could receive support for their children's (including the preschoolers) healthcare needs. Melissa said, "We try and find local supports that we can put people in connection with."

This story illustrates how educators can be proactive in engaging with whānau. Melissa listened to what the whānau needed and worked with them to be an ally and advocate. She also facilitated access to resources and support that would enable attendance and engagement for the children and whānau.

The power of a relationship where children and their whānau know they can trust and rely on staff in educational spaces to be truthful, fair, responsive, and present to understand and address their broader needs is also demonstrated through a story shared by Kelly, a reading recovery teacher.

Kelly highlighted a situation where she learned that a child she was working with was living in a form of homelessness. Kelly had built a rapport with this child during her reading recovery lessons, which led to the child feeling comfortable talking to her. When COVID-19 lockdowns and online learning protocols were implemented, Kelly began providing Zoom instruction to this child that included their parent being present and discussing the topic during the sessions. The parent also shared with Kelly other difficulties they and the child were facing. They lived in a single room in another family's home and slept in the same bed. Through ongoing conversations initiated by the child once school resumed in person, Kelly — and, through Kelly, the school — learned further details about the living

situation of the whānau. Kelly's relationships enabled the school to initiate further communication with the parent and ultimately learn about an impending situation that would necessitate the child's and parent's relocation. As a result, the school provided resources to support the child's transition to a new school.

Many of the participating educators spoke about the role and importance of developing and maintaining trust in their relationships with children and whānau. Without trust, facilitating the provision of resources or access to support was more challenging, though not necessarily impossible. The question of how trust could be built was raised across multiple interviews. One of the ways identified was the need for consistency in educational environments and the role of a primary contact person for children and whānau to engage with.

4.2.2 Consistency of Place and Persons and the Value of a Primary Contact Person

Many of the educator participants shared that, in addition to trust, consistency was a significant factor for building positive relationships with these children and whānau. They commented that the ability to establish consistency in interpersonal relationships can hinge on the child's regular attendance at school and the child remaining in the same school for consecutive years. Therefore, homelessness was described as having a significant impact on both a child's ability to attend school regularly and on the ability of the whānau to remain in the same location and/or school zone, the latter of which determined the child's ability to spend consecutive years at the same school. A key point made by the educators was that homelessness affects the number of schools, peer social networks, and school staff that a child will have to build relationships with and try to assimilate into each time they, with or without their whānau, move to a different location. When discussing the concept of consistency, participants highlighted three subthemes: consistency of place, consistency of people, and the role of a primary contact person.

4.2.2.1 Consistency of Place

All the educators interviewed for this research discussed the impact of housing insecurity on their ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with children and their whānau, specifically when there were frequent changes in schools. One 6-year-old child Kelly worked with was undergoing their third school change within the space of a year due to ongoing housing insecurity. Even within-school consistency was often

challenging for these whānau. Whetu and Marilyn spoke explicitly about the impact that homelessness and housing insecurity had on attendance, noting that these children can have so many absences that "you don't know what's happening" (Whetu). While educators discussed schools' legal requirement to reach out to whānau of absent children as a means of supporting child safety, they also described this contact with whānau as an essential mechanism that schools could use to better understand the context of whānau life and the impact of housing insecurity. Trusted relationships with whānau were often necessary for educators to understand the impact of the housing environment the child. Whetu said that, if she had developed a positive relationship with a parent and there was a string of unexplained absences, she would sometimes send them a message herself to say, "Hey, how's everything going?" At this point, she would often receive further information directly from the parent or caregiver about the whānau situation. This experience was also echoed by Marilyn, Rhonda, Ken, Theresa, and Melissa. While the emergency housing motels were acknowledged by several of the educators as not being ideal living situations for children and whānau, Melissa spoke of how consistency of place, even when that place is emergency housing, can have a positive impact:

> Within the motels, there has been one or two positives, one in that those families actually have stayed there. They haven't been moved on. So in some ways, even though it's not ideal, like some of them are living within a motel unit, that's not, you know, well, set up for number of children, that has meant their stability in their schooling.

Direct relationships between the educator and whānau therefore resulted in more meaningful and solutions-focused conversations compared to when office staff would call parents or caregivers in the event of child absences.

4.2.2.2 Consistency of People

Several of the educators who participated in this research worked at schools that had many emergency and/or transitional housing facilities in their school's zone and community. As a result, they were regularly interacting with children and whānau who had moved into the area because of housing insecurity or homelessness. Melissa spoke about how, in her role as LSC for her school, she would often welcome the same children repeatedly, as they would be moved out of the emergency housing and out of the school, only to return weeks or months later. Melissa pointed out that, while this rotation may

have resulted in some familiar faces, returning to the school did not mean the children felt immediately comfortable. In fact, she described that this process could result in children being more resistant and struggling to establish a sense of belonging, despite having previous experience at the school, because their membership in the community had been inconsistent:

> We get a lot of comings and goings. We've got another child coming back next week, and they were here a couple of years ago. So we get children who have had a number of different schools [due to] moving around, and then they come like so, they move, and then they come back, and then they move away again … You know, we've had some children with some pretty initially explosive and challenging behaviours.

This challenge of uncertainty and instability was reinforced in the story shared by Marilyn about the student who started at the beginning of Year 4 and then withdrew from their peers and learning opportunities as the end of the first term neared, telling their classroom teacher and peers they would not be back next term. Marilyn said, "[The child] started preparing to move on, because that's all [they] knew. And so we started seeing behaviour which is pushing people back. 'I don't want to interact anymore, because I'm going to lose you.'" However, the child did return to the school.

> *At the beginning of the next term, the child returned to school. Marilyn spoke of the way the child, who was accustomed to starting anew at different schools, struggled in new ways when compared to the original resistance and disengagement they displayed in the first term at the school. Marilyn believed that this was because their usual ways of being at school no longer fitted the context in which they now found themselves. Faced with a more consistent pattern of schooling, the child demonstrated challenges with maintaining friendships, and their behaviour pushed against boundaries both within the classroom and within their peer network.*

4.2.2.3 The Role of a Primary Contact Person

As described in section 4.2.1, many educators shared their perspectives on how schools can connect with and create lasting, trusted relationships with whānau who are experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. For these educators, a positive factor in establishing a trusting relationship and open lines of communication was having a school

staff member who served as the primary contact person for whānau when they wanted to discuss any challenges or unmet needs. Additionally, the educators discussed the importance of a primary contact person for children, whether that person was their classroom educator or another trusted staff member.

Educators explained that the primary contact person can vary. Most educators also noted that classroom educators often became the primary point of contact for children and that this relationship sometimes continued even after the children had moved to a new classroom. Other individuals identified as primary contact persons included administrative staff who established a trusted relationship with children or whānau, learning assistants (formerly known as teacher aides), and, in some instances, the school librarian. Educators suggested that the right primary contact for a child and their whānau depended on a myriad of factors. These included the tone of the first interaction, the regularity of contact, and in some instances the ability of the contact person to relate to the child's experiences and feelings (as further described in Section 4.6).

Several of the educators mentioned that the primary contact person for these whānau had usually been the deputy principal, principal, or, since 2020, the LSC. Anaru, however, described working at a school where the primary contact person for whānau was a local community member. At that school, the person was explicitly hired in a community liaison role, funded by the school board. According to Anaru, this position had two key aspects. The first of these was to reduce the time senior leadership spent communicating with support agencies and coordinating with whānau to facilitate access to needed resources. The second aspect was to provide the whānau with a familiar face, someone who could listen and help them identify their needs and priorities and then act as an advocate and facilitator between the whānau and support organisations. Anaru was of the opinion that the person's connection to the community was an asset in their role working with whānau, and he also noted that this process did not prevent the establishment of positive relationships between the school leadership team and whānau.

Melissa, an LSC, was the primary contact person for the children and whānau experiencing homelessness while being enrolled in her school. She shared many stories where she was instrumental in establishing connections and building a trusted relationship to develop further connections for whānau, including with the public health nurse, the social worker in school (SWiS), and local organisations to provide food and whānau services. For Melissa, being the point of contact and connection also involved working

with the local marae and creating a working relationship with an organisation to provide backpacks, stationery, and school supplies, thereby helping to support the children of whānau in emergency housing to enrol and return to school. Hinemoa, who was the LSC at her school, summed up her role in a similar way, saying she was "the agent on behalf of the student and whānau, and our social agencies, so I help connect them."

Rhonda, speaking from her experience at a special school, explicitly discussed the importance of having a single point of contact for whānau. In her school, one of the senior leadership team members was designated as the primary contact person for their school community. This role was initially established to ensure that the school provided consistent pastoral care for all children and their whānau regarding education-related concerns that fell beyond the scope of the classroom educator. However, Rhonda emphasised the importance of an educator's flexibility in adapting to and acting as the primary contact person for different whānau, depending on existing relationships. In her case, Rhonda said that, when she filled the role of primary contact person, she felt as though she was acting in many ways as a social worker and an advocate — working with, and on behalf of, the children and their whānau to communicate with housing organisations and support agencies in order to facilitate access to the support and resources they needed. This was particularly important for Rhonda as her school did not qualify to have a SWiS, which Rhonda believed was detrimental. To highlight the benefit of having a primary contact person, Rhonda described the challenges expressed to her by a whānau she had worked with, who told her they had been required to share the story of their current housing situation to five different people, yet they still felt that none of those people had listened. Due to such experiences, Rhonda said that some whānau may either choose not to recount their circumstances again or experience embarrassment in doing so: "When you've told that story five times and no one's listened, either you don't tell it again or you're almost embarrassed telling it." As a result of seeing the distress whānau may experience when having to share their stories repeatedly, Rhonda's school began to provide extra support for whānau making applications to access services or funding, such as through the Ministry of Education and/or the Ministry of Health, which is often a lengthy process. This meant that, as part of their everyday work with whānau, the primary contact person at Rhonda's school met with parents and asked how they could help, with the aim of reducing the number of times the whānau needed to repeat their story.

Due to her role as the LSC, Hinemoa was frequently the primary contact person for whānau with children enrolled in her school. When speaking about the power of a lasting and consistent relationship with a primary contact person, Hinemoa emphasised how valuable this was to the process of helping whānau open up and accept connections from other support organisations: "The other deliberate thing is that when I work with whānau it's about trust in relationships, so I have to have worked with them for a long time before they are going to say, you know, 'Sure … if you say I need to talk to this person and this is a good idea, then I'll do it.'" This illustrates the value of a sustained, positive relationship with a primary contact person who understands the circumstances, values, and feelings of the whānau about their experiences during a time of homelessness and housing insecurity.

Having someone in the role of primary contact person who is familiar with the story and ongoing needs of the whānau was also identified by the educators as an essential aspect of supporting the children. Lydia, a school librarian, spoke about the way that the children at her school who experienced housing insecurity often became very emotionally dysregulated, which she had seen manifest in behavioural issues or social withdrawal: "[We have] behavioural things quite often … it's becoming common practice to take the effort to say, look, is everything okay? That doesn't seem like the normal student that we know and love." It was Lydia's experience that children seek the comfort of a person who understands what they are dealing with in their home life; for many children at her school, that person is Lydia. Lydia opined that this was due to her being a long-standing member of her community and also her role as the adult in charge of a safe place in the school — the library. As the librarian, Lydia understood that she was able to provide access to a quiet environment filled with comfortable cushions, couches, and seats, as well as devices and books, which remained empty for significant portions of the day. These elements, in Lydia's view, made the library a haven of peace for children who were feeling emotionally overwhelmed. Lydia felt it was essential to allow the children the time they needed to feel calm after they arrived at the library door in an emotional state. When this happened, she described a system that the school had in place, which involved the use of the internal phone system to contact the classroom, thereby ensuring that the classroom educator knew where the child was and that they were safe. If this call indicated that the classroom educator was unaware of the child's location, Lydia would explain that the child was at the library. This way, if any action needed to be taken as the result of an incident that led the child to leave the classroom, the educator or senior leadership could

take appropriate steps. This system was set up to ensure the library — and Lydia — could remain a safe place for the children who needed time and space, while also ensuring that essential matters could be dealt with appropriately. Lydia's official job description as school librarian did not include pastoral care duties, but she believed that being a reliable point of contact for the children in the school community was an essential part of what she did to support them. She also mentioned there were times when she observed students and recognised their need for safety:

> [I] know something's not right, or, you know, they'll come up and give you a hug, which is out of character, or just come in and be near, be close, when they wouldn't usually do that. It's sort of like they just need that little bit more safe feeling, I suppose. And I guess I'm good at giving that safe space feeling.

Most of the participating educators recognised that children needed consistency in school attendance, in school environments, and in their interactions with people (whether peers or staff), as such consistency was key to fostering the ability of children and whānau to develop and maintain relationships. The educators also shared that having a person take on the role as primary contact for the children and whānau, which involved hearing their stories and understanding their needs, can both help to connect people with the relevant available supports and be a protective factor for the dignity of children and their whānau.

4.2.3 Relationships as a Foundation for Stability

Educators identified that a key factor when working with children and whānau was the need for stability, and they also discussed how this could be enabled through relationships. The majority of the educators considered stability of relationships and environment to be vital components of a child's social–emotional development and their academic progress. In their interviews, the educators spoke about stability in terms of both the impact that a lack of stability can have on children's behaviour and their ability to establish relationships. When children are obliged to engage in education spaces, the school environment can have a role in establishing a sense of stability for them and, at times, their whānau.

4.2.3.1 The Impact of the Lack or Loss of Stability

Several educators discussed the impact that a lack of or loss of stability can have on children and how this impact can influence their ability and desire to attend school. To contextualise this point, Melissa spoke about the significant traumatic experiences that can come alongside housing insecurity and cause instability in children's lives. Melissa shared the story of the time she was working with a whānau who had multiple children in the higher years of primary school.

> *Within a week of being enrolled at the school, one of the children left school in the middle of the day and ran back to the emergency housing where the whānau were staying. The child's father brought them back to school and told Melissa more about what they and the children were dealing with in addition to the housing insecurity already known to the school. During this conversation, Melissa learned the child had experienced a very traumatic situation in which they had witnessed their mother pass away due to a domestic violence incident with her new partner "Dad said, Look, the children have had really dreadful experiences. They've seen their mum bleed out on the floor." This incident was the primary reason the whānau found themselves in their current housing situation. The children's dad had to find somewhere safe to stay with his children in a very short time, all the while being there for his children who had lost a parent.*

In this situation, Melissa stated that the child's loss of stability was linked to the death of their mother, and that this led to the child wanting to leave the school environment to be near the comfort and safety they felt with their father. However, the child's father also expressed to Melissa that he believed the school was able and working to provide a stable environment for the children, particularly given its deep understanding of their traumatic circumstances, and this was something he was keen for his children to have.

4.2.3.2 The Role of the School Environment in Providing Stability

Speaking from his experience as deputy principal in a large coastal town, Anaru said that the school environment could often be the most stable physical location in the lives of the children and their whānau. He also described the people within the school environment as points of stability for whānau, including the children's social peer networks. One way Anaru's school enabled stability in the lives of the children and

whānau was by opening its facilities to whānau experiencing homelessness. The school started a sports group for the students, where Anaru would drive the school's mini-bus to the emergency housing motels to pick up the children between 6 and 7 am, and they would join other school students in the school gym to play team sports or train for different sports through various types of workouts. This programme provided the children with an opportunity to connect with their peers. It also included the use of the gym's bathroom facilities, which allowed all the children to start the day with not only social engagement but also a shower. Ken, who was a deputy principal at an intermediate school, also described using the school's facilities and resources to create stability — including collaboration across all of the schools in the town and surrounding area through their Kahui Ako (Community of Learning) to establish consistency and predictability of responses for whānau who had children in different schools in the same area. This consistency applied to the information provided, as well as the approach to managing behavioural needs or issues, so that even when the exact school location was not the same, the stability of the overall school experience was still present.

One of the ways Melissa, as the LSC, fostered stability was by visiting the emergency housing motels to check in with the whānau there and to see if any whānau have arrived who needed help enrolling their children. Melissa said that sometimes whānau moved in very abruptly and did not immediately reach out to the school, not because they did not want their children in school but because they were unsure of what would happen next.

> *Melissa also noted that, in some ways, there had been a positive outcome for one whānau she worked with who had stayed at the emergency housing motel for the last three and a half years: the children had been able to stay at the school and remain in the same community. This meant that the school community had become a stabilising factor for them, even though the living situation in the motel was not favourable overall. Melissa described taking backpacks and stationery items to the motels to introduce herself to whānau and encourage them to enrol their children in school. According to Melissa, the stability of schooling for several children depended on their not moving out of emergency housing.*

In Melissa's experience, it was rare for parents experiencing homelessness to be unemployed. Instead, the more typical situation in her area was the lack of suitable or affordable housing. Whānau wanted to stay in their area because they were trying to

maintain stability and consistency for their children. They were very concerned about moving away from where they had built some of that support network. Rhonda expressed her belief that experiencing housing insecurity creates "pressure cooker" situations for whānau and their children. As a school, they can counter this environment and provide routine, consistency, and stability.

The educators identified and acknowledged that stability across a range of areas was a critical element of working with whānau and children experiencing homelessness. They also acknowledged that, in most situations, the whānau themselves were doing the best they could to provide and hold on to what stability they had some level of control over.

4.2.4 The Role of Relationships in Understanding and Countering Stigma

The educators described several subthemes relating to relationships and stigma, or fear of being stigmatised, and how this influenced the behaviours of children and their whānau when it came to engaging with learning and the school community. Some educators pointed out that a fear of feeling judged and stigmatised can create a barrier to parents being willing to communicate their unmet needs or ask for support. Several educators also identified stigma as a cause of inconsistent attendance, which could then contribute to difficulties in developing relationships.

4.2.4.1 Stigma and the Reluctance to Communicate Needs or Concerns

Based on their experiences and conversations with whānau, several educators identified stigma and the fear of being judged or, in the worst-case scenario, losing their children, as reasons why parents appeared to be reluctant to engage with schools about their needs or concerns. Rhonda had noticed that the parents of children with significant disabilities were sometimes afraid to advocate for their needs and reach out for resources. She believed that this fear was connected to the stigma of actively being in a housing crisis and the fear of having things taken away, or not being given things that they needed, because they may have been deemed not "grateful enough the first time" they needed and accepted help. In Rhonda's context (a special school), the parents expressed concerns about what they said about their child, even if it was true, because they did not want anyone in the agencies or organisations to think that their child was "bad." Rhonda said that her school regularly reassured parents that it was best to be honest about the issues

they were dealing with — whether the specific needs of their child or the needs of the whānau more broadly — because they deserved to receive the support.

Rhonda observed that some of the parents at her school were afraid of "not rocking the boat" and of people perceiving them as not good enough parents or having bad children. This is illustrated through a story shared by Rhonda about her interaction with a parent.

> *The parent sent their child to school despite not being able to provide lunch, then they called Rhonda to apologise. Rhonda elaborated that, even though she understood this parent's situation and had only been supportive of and an advocate for the whānau, the parent still expressed feeling embarrassed and upset. Rhonda described how the parent had said, "Please don't think I'm not a caring mum. Please don't think I'm not doing the right thing because I'm really trying." Rhonda had reassured her, saying, "That's the last thing we think. We know you're doing the best you can." The parent also informed Rhonda that she had intended to keep her child home, but in the end, she remembered Rhonda telling her that, even if she did not have enough food for her child's lunch or if the child had not had any breakfast, she should "still send them to school, and we can get it sorted." The parent took Rhonda at her word and sent her child to school, but she still felt and verbally expressed guilt and shame.*

Hinemoa described working with whānau who would not discuss their housing insecurity or crisis with the school out of fear of the stigma attached. This concern also extended to the fear of attracting the attention or involvement of government agencies or other organisations with which whānau had negative interactions, or were aware that such interactions could occur. Marilyn spoke about having a parent threaten to "beat the crap out of her" if she were to get any agencies involved in wraparound support for the whānau and the child. That threat, from Marilyn's perspective, was based on the parent's past experiences. To overcome this barrier, which had been created by fear and stigma, the school engaged long-standing local iwi relationships they had actively cultivated to obtain help for this whānau without involving the agencies that had caused previous frustration and anger. Marilyn described how essential it is to avoid reinforcing the stigma faced by whānau who are experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness and to avoid deficit perspectives and assumptions. She described the need to prioritise understanding whānau strengths, the knowledge and skills people bring, and how they might want to contribute,

as opposed to reinforcing negative feelings that may already be present in the child and whānau due to their living situation.

Rhonda raised an aspect of stigma connected to the complexity of the pathways to housing insecurity or homelessness, which involve different levels of control and choices made by whānau. Some circumstances may be the result of situations genuinely outside of their control. However, she also acknowledged that there are times when a whānau is in insecure housing or homelessness because of decisions that the adult(s) in the whānau have made. Several of the educators contended, however, that, even if there had been "failure" on the part of the parent, no child deserves to be homeless. They asserted that children have the right to shelter, food, love, belonging, education, and access to support and resources that help facilitate those rights. Rhonda noted that, while it is the parents who may be turned down by support agencies for various reasons, it is often the children who pay a hidden price.

Another theme illustrating the role of stigma was highlighted by Rhonda, who spoke about how the school found out that something had gone "wrong" with the housing situation of one of the students and their whānau. Rhonda said that, in her experience, whānau usually did not contact the school to report a crisis or indicate they were struggling. Instead, the school learned about changed circumstances through a request to update the address used for funded taxi transportation, which was commonly used for disability support. Rhonda explained that whānau often felt embarrassed about telling others why they had to move, and they worried about being treated poorly and held responsible for the circumstances they found themselves in, even if they were not to blame.

Educators suggested that the lack of communication between housing organisations and schools has led to avoidable situations in which whānau are embarrassed and the school is confused. Moana spoke about this in relation to a large transitional housing facility that was built in the catchment area for their school's zone. The facility contained multiple units for individuals and whānau. The school was not informed that this facility had been constructed and only learned about it when they received several enrolment forms for children from unrelated whānau. When the school began processing the forms, it was discovered that they all had the same address, which raised concerns within the school administration about enrolment zone fraud. This meant that school leaders called the whānau involved to ask them about the issue with the

address, and the whānau were essentially forced to disclose that they were living in transitional housing. Whānau were left embarrassed, and Moana discussed how some of the parents involved felt they were being accused of lying about their address, which made them feel vulnerable and put the school's relationship-building efforts on the back foot.

Ken described first-hand experience of this stigma after gaining the trust of a whānau who was experiencing homelessness and stepping in to help them when their child needed to see a doctor for an injury that occurred during the school holidays. This is the first part of Ken's story, and further parts will be shared in Sections 4.3.2 and 4.6.2.

> *Ken said that he was at the hospital with the child, with the explicit consent of the parents, for 10 hours. The diagnosis of a broken bone led health professionals to begin asking questions about how and when the injury occurred. Ken had arranged for the parents to get a ride to the hospital. The mother and father were asked questions about how the child received the injury, and Ken was asked questions about the whānau. Ken told the people asking questions that the parents loved their children, were doing their best, and were "involved parents" who were working to overcome challenges. Ken described that this situation could have "gone south," and there was the very real possibility that the parents would become angry at him for causing it by insisting that the child see a doctor for their injured hand. However, because Ken had been supporting this whānau, they understood he was there to help, not harm. Ken remained close to this whānau, despite their relocation to a housing unit in another town, because his words and actions demonstrated to them that he was genuinely there to help, not judge. He did not try to take things away from them, nor put a spotlight on things that were not going well; the whānau understood that he genuinely cared.*

Ken also spoke about how schools can help remove the stigma that a child or whānau may feel about needing extra support through the way it is provided. To illustrate this, he described how his school had approached one aspect of the support they were providing:

> There was a bit of a stigma attached to Breakfast Club and we were holding it in the food room. And then we moved it into the food court and just operated from

> the canteen, and anyone and everyone could come in, pretty much help themselves. All of a sudden that's just, it doesn't have a stigma attached anymore.

Multiple participating educators also identified stigma as a possible contributor to poor parental and child mental health, increased stress, lack of school attendance, and resistance to engagement with the school. Additionally, the educators articulated that the stigma of homelessness is often compounded by the negative interactions that whānau have had with organisations, agencies, and prior schools. As Hinemoa stated, "There are whānau who mistrust, and that is usually whānau that have experienced some level of generational harm [that impacts] trust and communication."

4.2.4.2 Stigma and the Connection to Inconsistent Attendance

Educators shared how important it was for their schools to do everything possible to meet the needs of the children and their whānau in order to maximise their engagement. They described parents feeling so ashamed of their circumstances, particularly financial difficulties and food insecurity, that they would keep their child home. Educators stated that schools, often through their primary contact person, would encourage whānau to send their child to school without lunch or without having breakfast, and they would provide them with food. Rhonda further added that, in her context, stigma related to food insecurity was compounded by the fact that the children also had a primary diagnosis of some form of severe disability, which can also have an associated stigma.

Another aspect of stigma that educators spoke about was related to visiting the homes that whānau have moved into. Marilyn said that, at times, there were issues with the houses not being in good condition. This was the case with a whānau described by Theresa who were living in a previously abandoned old farmhouse provided for them when they lost their previous housing. Several educators shared that the houses involved typically lacked insulation, had leaks or other damp-related issues such as mould, or were overcrowded with two or more whānau sharing the house. In one situation, Marilyn discovered that, in addition to the house being poorly insulated, the whānau did not have beds. As Marilyn had built a strong relationship with the whānau, they were open to her offering to help them locate beds through her connections in the community. Marilyn believed that forming strong whānau connections and establishing trusted relationships enabled educators to make informed judgment calls as to whether support could be offered and accepted. Marilyn said that making the wrong call could further perpetuate

feeling of being “othered” and living with the stigma of their situation, which could impact the willingness of the whānau to engage with any services, including school.

4.2.5 Educator Roles in Prioritising Agency and Empowerment and Preserving Dignity Through Relationships

Agency and empowerment, from the participating educators’ perspectives, involved ensuring that the needs and aspirations of whānau and children were prioritised when considering what support, resources, or interventions to offer them. Educators described that consistent and trusting relationships between educators, children, and whānau improved their own understanding of how to approach and work with whānau. It also enabled open and honest communication, which allowed whānau to feel comfortable explaining what they were experiencing and what they needed. This also ensured that the mana and dignity of children and whānau were preserved. The educators were consistent in their perspective that giving priority to children’s narratives about their actual unmet needs led to more successful outcomes compared to when children and whānau were told what they needed or when the educator/school made assumptions about the unmet needs of the child and whānau. As Hinemoa said, “Whānau don’t want help at them.”

Across the interviews, educators spoke of working with children and their whānau in a way that ensured they were not making assumptions, thereby respecting the individual needs of each whānau and child. The educators acknowledged that navigating this line was not always easy. When further discussing the story of the whānau she had visited and built trust with to facilitate consistent attendance and a positive relationship, Marilyn also spoke of how the interactions with the whānau worked towards empowering both the child and the parent to feel confident about participating in school activities and learning programmes. Continuing with her story from Section 4.2, Marilyn went on to say,

> *The trust in the relationship ultimately led the parent to disclose that, due to his own negative school experiences, he was unable to read and lacked the literacy skills needed to support his child with their reading. Marilyn approached this with understanding, and together they found a way to ensure that the school was also helping him engage with the child to support their learning in other areas. In this instance, Marilyn had discovered that the parent is a talented sportsman who*

excels in several sports, so the school focused on encouraging him to utilise his strengths when engaging with the school and his child's learning.

According to Marilyn, helping children and whānau impacted by homelessness is about recognising how to encourage whānau to use their own skills in order to support their children. This empowers them to identify and apply their strengths and then hone those skills to provide the child with positive examples as they work to achieve further success in their learning and overall development.

The educators emphasised that, while working with whānau and children, they needed to ensure their actions and words did not negatively impact the dignity and mana of the whānau. They recognised that living with homelessness or housing insecurity puts people in a vulnerable position. They acknowledged that there are many ways schools and educators can contribute to ensuring that students and whānau have their agency and sense of self-worth considered and prioritised. The educators also spoke about the importance of schools actively cultivating a dynamic in which the child and whānau retain agency through a "hand up, not a hand out," as Huia said, or, in Hinemoa's words, "allow[ing] them to still feel like they have a sense of mana."

4.2.6 Relationships — Summary

All the educators asserted that relationships are always meaningful in education, but they believed that strong relationships were particularly critical for children and whānau experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. Providing whānau with a stable and consistent contact person, as well as ensuring the whānau and children feel comfortable with the educator who is their primary contact, enables an accurate understanding of what support the child needs, what wraparound support can be put in place, and how to make the most appropriate connections to other support agencies and organisations.

Ensuring that the voice and beliefs of whānau are understood while avoiding stigma and assumptions was described as integral to building positive relationships. Educators described that each whānau dynamic is unique, with different pathways to housing insecurity or homelessness. Prioritising listening to the whānau, leading with empathy and understanding, and being responsive when they communicate their needs are all part of supporting whānau and children to retain agency over their lives in as many

ways as possible when dealing with a crisis, thereby creating space for them to feel empowered.

4.3 Hauora

This section discusses the second major theme described by educators — the impact of homelessness and housing insecurity on child and whānau hauora, or holistic well-being. The section begins by placing hauora in context with the official work of educators and highlighting that understanding the hauora of learners and whānau is a necessary component for educators to navigate while also meeting the curriculum and achievement expectations of the teaching profession. The section then utilises aspects of Te Whare Tapa Whā model to unpack hauora as it relates to students' physical, social, mental, and emotional well-being.

4.3.1 Hauora and Academic Achievement as Focuses of Educators' Work

Most participants described the "official" work of the educator as meeting the New Zealand Curriculum achievement expectations through the delivery of classroom programmes and the collection of assessment data to report to the Ministry of Education, as this is where a significant amount of the system pressures lies. At the same time, all participants emphasised that care for the well-being of their learners was also part of the educator's role. They acknowledged that it was vital to understand and ensure that hauora is a priority when working with children experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. Through their stories, a clear message emerged that it is necessary to support children to achieve a holistic sense of well-being before learning can begin. Marilyn stated that educators "must look at what's not being met" from a hauora perspective before they can even start to think about what learning goal needs to be focused on and progressed. Huia said that her own understanding — gained through professional development in trauma-informed practice — was that there is no learning when the brain is not in a state of calmness:

> When you start in that state of trauma, there's no [learning] starting point until you get to a place of mauri tau, and then by the time you get to mauri tau, it is just a hope that that child is still … a student of yours so that you can then work towards realising or helping the child realise their potential.

Hinemoa reiterated this point when she said, “Once you’re tau, once you know you’re safe, once you know you can trust who is with you, other things can then happen.” The educators’ perspective was that school environments cannot solely focus on learning while the child is at school because of the stress and trauma being experienced when they return to emergency or transitional housing outside of school hours.

Huia specifically mentioned that trying to support a child to have hauora is complicated by the reality that, as educators, they do not necessarily know if a student living in emergency housing will be at school the next day. This point was echoed by Marilyn, Whetu, and Melissa. Another issue raised by several of the educators was that, once the basic needs of a child are being met, there is not an immediate bounce back to “normal” as scars are left by the trauma of living with uncertainty and insecurity about basic needs. Therefore, children with these experiences not only need time; they also require deliberate and specific intervention and support to reestablish their mauri through an approach that prioritises hauora.

4.3.2 Physical Well-Being

Physical well-being, taha tinana, is dependent in large part on having all the basic needs for physical survival met. The educators said that there were often signs that one or more of these needs were not being met, such as a lack of adequate shelter; lack of access to household hygiene appliances (washing machines, dryers), clean clothes (including school uniforms), and hygiene-related amenities (showers/hygiene products); a lack of food; and lack of sleep. Many of the educators explained that the presence of even one of these factors would negatively impact the child’s physical well-being and, consequently, their ability to fully engage and be mentally present at school. Ken mentioned that, when it comes to the impact of living conditions on the physical well-being of the children, “number one is sickness and illness in the home. Once it spreads, it spreads like wildfire. There’s not enough warmth. There’s not enough heating, there’s not enough food, there’s not enough medicines in the home, to be able to fight those illnesses, often colds.”

Rhonda, Ken, Anaru, and Whetu all discussed instances where their schools, whether through existing school programmes or the actions of individual educators, recognised and addressed the physical needs of children. Whetu recounted a time when a child arrived at school after spending the night without a home.

Whetu explained the child seemed tired and was not their usual energetic self. When checking in with the child, Whetu was told that the whānau had had to sleep in their car and that the child had not been able to get much sleep or have breakfast. Whetu provided the child with breakfast, and the child spent much of the day sleeping, thus meeting two fundamental needs for their physical well-being.

Part of educators' planning for the children therefore involved not only in-class or school learning programmes but also efforts to address the other challenges whānau were facing. Hinemoa spoke about the role her school played in providing resources for occasions when the children would not be in school: "We will do kai packs for our large whānau at the end of the year or end of the term." When speaking about how the issue of children being hungry and experiencing food insecurity was often connected to housing insecurity, Huia shared a story about how she looked to address this in her school community.

Huia reported that, as a school, they decided to create a sustainable programme to address the ongoing needs associated with whānau struggling with food insecurity. The first step was to support whānau to utilise the natural resources in the whenua around them. The school and community were situated near the ocean, so students visited the coastline with school staff and community members to learn how to harvest from the sea. They also learned how to recognise and harvest edible plant life from the land and how to identify and utilise the space around them to grow kai. Huia described this as a "powerful opportunity" for the children and their whānau to add to their resources. Huia further described how the school community "pulled up 50 kilos of kumara from an area of what was lawn last year." This had been "really powerful for the tamariki to see."

Rhonda connected the provision of food to the way her school was implementing the Ka Ora, Ka Ako healthy school lunches programme, saying that the school made the decision to outsource food and set up delivery because some parents had their children attend satellite classes located within another school. They sent the food out each day to ensure that all enrolled children, regardless of their campus location, received at least one nutritious meal during their school day.

Educators suggested that children were motivated to attend school when they knew that it was a space where they would have access to food and warmth. Theresa spoke about this with regard to some children at her school: "I think because the[ir] house was so cold, when they shifted to the sort of abandoned building type deal, they were at school all the time, because it was warm, and we would feed them. And as a school, we clothed them in the school uniform."

In addition to identifying the unmet needs of children when they arrived at school, educators noted that they could also receive this information directly from the whānau, who may reach out. Rhonda mentioned a situation where she received a call from a parent who was distressed because they were in a motel room with their severely autistic child, who, for reasons the parents did not understand, was screaming for hours at a time. This was causing issues for the whānau with regard to how they were being treated by other people who were also in emergency housing motel rooms. Rhonda said that, when children are in emergency or transitional housing that is not adequately meeting their physical well-being needs, school necessarily becomes about keeping them calm and providing a quiet space. She illustrated this point in the following story.

> *Rhonda understood that, when things have been so hard for children, they do not want to come to school, and their parents do not have the energy to make them go, which she believed was a fair point from the parents' perspective. However, Rhonda also pointed out that, when parents do not send their children to school, they are then left trying to manage their children's needs in an inadequate housing space with limited financial resources, while, in her particular school context, also managing the challenges associated with their child's disabilities.*

The participating educators also spoke about times when they stepped up to help whānau meet the medical needs of their students to ensure their physical well-being. This is the second section of Ken's story that began in section 4.2.4.1, and will conclude in section 4.6.2.

> *Ken had taken the time to establish a strong, trusted relationship with the parents and children of a whānau experiencing homelessness. When the child arrived at school after the holidays with a very swollen hand, the child freely shared that they had fallen while climbing over a fence three weeks earlier. Ken took the child home to the parents, who he said explained that they could not afford the petrol*

> *or the fee to take the child to the doctor or the hospital. Ken organised with the whānau to take the child to the hospital emergency room, where doctors confirmed there was a significant break and provided the medical care the child needed to recover and regain full physical health.*

Marilyn's story that began in section 4.2, first in 4.2.1 and then in 4.2.5, concludes here. This story further illustrates the role educators can play in the medical aspects of physical well-being.

> *Marilyn's relationship with the child and the parent meant that, when in-school testing indicated the child needed further vision testing and the parent did not have the resources for this, Marilyn took the child to get their eyes tested with the parent's permission, thereby facilitating the child's acquisition of glasses.*

All of the participating educators recognised that the physical well-being of children is an essential component of being ready and able to learn. As a result, the educators — and the schools they worked at — took an active role in helping provide the resources and support required to establish and maintain physical well-being. The educators described this work towards meeting physical well-being needs as the first step in establishing hauora, but they stressed that hauora cannot be addressed in a vacuum, as the social well-being of a child also significantly impacts their ability to engage in learning programmes.

4.3.3 Social Well-Being

In their interviews, the educators identified four aspects that pertain to social well-being: (i) students' connection to their cultural identity and cultural groups; (ii) students' connections to community organisations, sports clubs, church, or other faith-based groups; (iii) tensions in the whānau unit due to the stress being placed upon them; and (iv) the loss or lack of peer networks and connections with trusted adults due to constant changes in their living situation. The educators discussed these aspects, including both the potential negative impacts and instances in which the school environment or actions by the school, whānau, or the wider community can help mitigate them.

4.3.3.1 Connection to Cultural Identity

Most educators asserted that students' strong and ongoing connection to their cultural heritage and identity is an important aspect of maintaining their positive social

well-being. Marilyn believed that fostering avenues for children and whānau to establish and maintain cultural ties was an essential part of how schools provided support, regardless of the child's cultural heritage. However, Marilyn, Huia, Hinemoa, and Melissa all acknowledged having an over-representation of Māori children amongst the homeless whānau in their school communities. With this in mind, the educators sought to understand how to facilitate cultural connections as part of the support network for Māori children by identifying opportunities through consultation with the community, including whānau, marae, and iwi. The consultation with the community was not solely focused on Māori cultural ties; further consultation and connections were made with local community organisations and groups. The educators' perspective was that positive engagement and consultation helped develop an understanding of both individual and community needs. Further, engagement identified how local opportunities, organisations, and programmes could meet those needs and maintain connections, which in turn supported effective decision-making when identifying resources to invest in for the children in the school community. Marilyn suggested that, by ensuring the school focused on being both culturally responsive and culturally active, it ensured they were consistently putting forward programmes and fostering an environment that said to the children and their whānau, "You do not have to leave your [culture] at the gate and act like something you are not to be successful here, to be accepted here, to belong here."

4.3.3.2 Connection to Community Organisations, Sports Clubs, and Church or Other Faith-Based Groups

Many educators believe that the school environment can be a protective factor for the social well-being of children and their whānau by providing an environment that fosters connections to community organisations, churches, or other faith-based groups. Kelly highlighted this as part of her position in a faith-based special character school,

> *Kelly mentioned that her school community was relatively small and that the special religious character enhanced the sense of connection for the children and their whānau. The common thread of faith in the school community, along with the relatively small school roll and the fact that quite a few of the children were related in some way, meant that in some ways the nature of the school community insulated the child from any disruption to their connection to their faith and community groups. This was not just because the school was full of familiar faces but also because they did not just see the other children and some staff when they*

were at school; they also saw them at whānau or community events, or at church outside of school hours.

The significance of fostering connections was also recognised by educators working in public schools that provided spaces and resources for clubs and community groups. Anaru gave the example of a local sports organisation that used the school to run sports practices and casual games. Several of the educators spoke about organisations using their school as a nexus to run events, as the school represented a safe and accessible space for children and whānau in the community, especially those living in emergency and transitional housing, which several educators noted often did not have an outdoor space for the children to play in. Many of the educators stated that the school environment could be a positive place for the children to be — an environment that allowed them respite from the stress of living with homelessness and housing insecurity, as well as a space where they could be children surrounded by their peers in a shared environment. As Lydia said, "I think they like coming to school because it is a fun, safe environment. A lot of them, I think, would rather be here than home."

4.3.3.3 The Whānau Unit

Several of the educators shared the perspective that living with homelessness causes significant stress on whānau members and could cause tension in whānau relationships. This perspective was based on their experiences working with children and whānau, as well as seeing interactions between children and whānau members.

Whetu asserted that the impact of stress and the development of tension in the whānau unit depends on how the whānau navigates its housing challenges. Whetu went on to say that there can be further trauma and lingering tension in a situation that pulls the whānau apart physically, even if just for a short period:

> They need to feel like they've got a home and shelter. And if they're not sure who they're going to in the evening, that can be really disconcerting. I mean, that goes above any learning that you do at school, because that comes forefront. You know, where am I going to eat? Where am I going to sleep? Who's going to look after me?

However, she said that, if a whānau can navigate the situations they encounter while remaining together as a unit, it may mean that the impacts of stress and tension will not be lasting.

Experiencing a housing crisis or housing insecurity did not always mean that there would be a breakdown in the relationship between the child and their caregiver. This point was illustrated by a story Kelly shared about one of her learners.

> *Kelly said there appeared to be a strong relationship between the child and their mother; the child received a great deal of love and support in the interactions Kelly saw. Kelly noted that a feature of the whānau dynamic was that the child was always given the information they needed to understand what was happening in their lives. According to Kelly, this knowledge was also apparent in the way the child understood and could articulate why they had to move houses. Kelly also noted that one aspect of this child's circumstances was that they would always reside in a place where they and their mum shared a room. This provided an element of consistency even when the location of the room changed. The positive relationship between parent and child, from Kelly's perspective, shielded the child from feeling the negative impacts that the stress of housing insecurity created.*

4.3.3.4 Loss or Lack of Peer Networks and Connections with Trusted Adults

The loss of peer networks and trusted adults through homelessness is connected to the theme of relationships. When categorised under social well-being, there is a focus on the ways that educators and schools identify and address the loss or lack of peer networks or trusted relationships with adults, both of which support hauora. According to the educators' accounts, if a child was moved to a new school due to a loss of housing or a move to an emergency housing motel or transitional housing, the child may struggle to form relationships with peers and adults.

Many educators noted that, at times, a child's behaviour could leave other children and staff with the impression that the child was completely uninterested in building these relationships, or they were upset at having to leave their trusted peers and adults behind. Huia described an example of this from her school:

> [We] had students recently that came from massive displacement moved to [town], not by their choice, and arrive at school with really poor social skills and just want to fight each other and anyone else. And it took some a really long time

> to calm down, and then it's like you nearly need a PhD in psychology to help navigate [their] trauma."

Huia shared her perspective that emergency housing facilities are not always available in the community where a whānau lives when they lose their housing, or the available facilities are unsuitable for the whānau. As a result, the children and their whānau are forced to move away and therefore can experience a loss of connection with people and places.

> *Huia said that, as she worked to understand the needs and situations surrounding housing insecurity in her school community, she discovered that whānau in the community who require emergency housing support are usually placed in facilities that are at least 30 minutes away from their local community. This distance means that getting the children from those whānau back to school is difficult. This is especially challenging because, as Huia noted, the whānau generally do not know how long they will be in emergency housing, and they usually have limited financial resources to support the commute required to maintain attendance. Huia said that this means the whānau are placed in an unknown town without the networks of whānau and friends from their community. Therefore, she believed that emergency housing often instantly pushes whānau away from their meaningful relationships and familiar places. She referred to this as "an absolute uprooting of their lives." This practice means that some children cannot physically attend the school they want to attend, a right that Huia pointed out they have.*

One topic that came up multiple times across the interviews was the concept of education outside the classroom (EOTC) and its role in providing children with positive shared experiences among their peers. Examples of EOTC shared by the participants included school camps, participating in various activities or visiting locations in the area, as well as in-school visits and events. A common understanding the educators shared is that, when a whānau is faced with housing insecurity or homelessness, there is usually also some financial insecurity or deficit, which could lead to children missing out on the opportunity to engage with their peers. This led, in many instances, to the school assuming the responsibility of covering the economic costs for those trips or events. The educators stated that this was intended to help alleviate some of the financial stress on whānau and,

importantly, ensure that the children could attend the EOTC opportunities available to all their peers without feeling that their participation in these activities or events was a burden on their whānau. Many educators stated that by the school filling that potential gap and bearing that financial responsibility, the affected children would be able to experience what is acknowledged by the New Zealand Curriculum as essential learning opportunities. As Huia put it, educators understood that "we do not spend all of our lives in the four walls of a classroom, and therefore, we need to understand that the world is a place of learning." Many of the educators agreed that, when working with whānau and children who were navigating housing insecurity or homelessness, it was important to enable these children to participate in EOTC learning opportunities. Educators shared that EOTC fosters children's ability to feel belongness in their classroom spaces with their peers and to have shared experiences that they can discuss with others, thereby building new learning and expanding their knowledge. Therefore, missing these opportunities would therefore significantly impact children's education overall.

Many educators stated that they had come to understand, through their experiences working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness, that the school and teaching staff needed to focus on addressing any factors that could impact their overall social well-being. Several educators elaborated that this involved learning to recognise a child's behavioural signals that they did not feel safe and using a trauma-informed approach to ensure that the children did feel safe and that the school culture was built and centred around establishing strong social foundations.

4.3.4 Mental and Emotional Well-Being

Educators emphasised the importance of being willing to engage with and understand a child's current emotional development. Once educators understood the child's emotional development and state, they considered themselves more able to identify the support a child and their whānau needed to help them move towards positive mental and emotional well-being. When discussing mental and emotional well-being, the educators spoke about the possible negative effects of homelessness or housing insecurity on the development of self-talk and self-esteem. They also spoke about the higher instances of emotional dysregulation that impact behaviours in the school environment, as well as the need for the school to become a place of comfort and calm for children currently experiencing housing insecurity or who had a previous history of homelessness.

Several educators described children expressing concern that they were in some way responsible for the negative situations their whānau was experiencing. As Whetu explained, children may express "self-doubt and wonder, you know, what could I have done better?" The potential for self-doubt to become a pattern of negative self-talk and self-esteem was highlighted by several educators as a barrier to mental and emotional well-being.

Marilyn, Melissa, Lydia, and Rhonda all spoke about children who were emotionally dysregulated in school environments and who expressed anger and distress through their actions. Marilyn recalled that one child "would cry a lot, get really scared of anything new" once she started at Marilyn's school after moving into stable housing. Marilyn pointed out that moving from emergency housing into a stable home did not mean that children did not have or exhibit any concerns or worries. One of the whānau Marilyn worked with illustrated this lingering concern. The whānau consisted of a single mother, her three biological children, and one of her nieces, of whom she had legal custody.

> *Marilyn described how the 5-year-old child of this whānau showed a lot of anxiety, which usually presented as frequent episodes of crying at school. When it became clear to Marilyn and the classroom educator that the child was hyper-vigilant and constantly looking for dangers at school, they implemented special programmes to help ensure the child could feel safe. One of the things the school did to ensure this was to focus on assuring the child that they belonged, mattered, and were important through consistent verbal reassurance.*

Several educators expressed the importance of helping children establish a sense of peace and comfort in being themselves, as this facilitated positive mental and emotional well-being. The educators stated that this process began by creating a school environment that could serve as a positive space, separate from the uncertain living situation. Huia said, "Every family that I have spoken to that have gone into emergency housing situations speaks of the lack of safety and integrity of the places and spaces for them as adults, let alone their children. So in that instance, you know, we always try to make ourselves happy and a safe space for our tamariki."

Many of the educators expressed that the children who experience homelessness or housing insecurity are experiencing a lot of loss — of material belongings, of familiar

people, and of familiar places. As a result, they can lose that sense of feeling comfortable with who they are because they lose a thread of connection. Lydia spoke about this point, saying, “And quite often, you can see it in a child, where they don’t look after their stuff as well as they could, because they’re so used to losing it, because it’s had to be left behind, or, you know, they’ve lived in a car and can’t take everything.” Huia shared the following:

> I think it’s always important for our tamariki to be proud or moving towards being proud of their identity. I think, you know, once we have someone that can stand confidently in their skin, that’s a massive milestone. So what do we do? We intentionally make time for our tamariki to learn their whakapapa and try and connect to people in their whānau [because] they can help with reconnecting them back to their ancestral lands. So we do our part to try and work out what are some common grounds, and then go into the geography on what these places look like. We also deem it of importance to do experiences … to learn that full welcoming process and the intricacies of sharing our stories or our backgrounds and then finding some common ground, and then learning our connectedness. That’s really important in celebrating our connectedness to te ao Maori, [but] it doesn’t come at the cost of our tamariki tērā Cambodian. It just allows them to learn another language of how [to develop] an appreciation of connectedness

Several of the educators indicated that their schools would provide resources, such as backpacks, stationery, and uniforms, to help ensure that the children could participate in classroom learning programmes. The educators considered this act of providing learning resources and removing a barrier to engagement to be key to helping the children reengage with their learning strengths, find new strengths or talents, and develop new skills, which could help ensure that they felt reconnected to themselves and their identity.

4.3.5 Hauora — Summary

Ultimately, the educators all asserted that physical, social, and mental–emotional well-being all need to be understood, considered, and addressed when working with children experiencing homelessness. As the educators shared, implementing interventions and supports to address unmet needs in the areas of well-being is an essential part of creating learning environments and programmes that facilitate engagement with learning and progress towards academic goals.

4.4 Communication

According to the participants, communication is essential for connecting with learners and their whānau. It is part of the foundation for positive relationships, integral to identifying needs (both learning and otherwise), and essential when engaging with relevant support systems. Communication was spoken about within three sub-themes. First, the educators emphasised the importance of communicating with the children themselves in an open, transparent and age-appropriate manner to understand their needs and convey their options. Second, they explained that it is essential to ensure communication with whānau is as proactive and positive as possible, rather than focused solely on the negative aspects of the child's involvement in school or only addressing issues as they arise. And third, as well as communication between educators and children/whānau, several educators also believed that improved communication between schools when children are moved from one school to another would enable better wraparound support for the child and their whānau. This was held by several of the educators to be vital both for the child's academic and social–emotional needs and for the needs of the whānau more broadly.

Notably, during the interviews, several educators highlighted the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on opening new or previously underutilised lines of communication with both children and whānau. The educators acknowledged that, while COVID-19 was a challenging time, some learning methods and approaches have emerged from that experience that have enabled new pathways for creating and maintaining lines of communication when physical presence is not possible due to a loss of housing. Huia noted that a school's attention to establishing and maintaining these pathways for positive proactive communication options can also address the issue of physical attendance, which she noted had been made a punishable offence for which parents of absentee children can be taken to court. Huia elaborated on the utilisation of the now-standard communication methods in her school, which she learned from teaching through the COVID-19 lockdowns.

> *One of the primary supports the school offers to whānau facing homelessness is providing the whānau with devices and vouchers for access to online data so that the child can, in some way, remain connected with their peers at school, with their educator, and, therefore, with their in-school community. Huia acknowledged that, before the COVID-19 lockdowns and the compulsory need to create these*

solutions to facilitate communication and engagement in learning as required by the Ministry of Education, her school had not considered the options they now provided to whānau facing housing insecurity. Without the experiences of COVID-19, they may not have become part of the support they now offered.

4.4.1 The Importance of Communicating with the Children in an Open and Age-Appropriate Manner

Several educators emphasised that it was important to communicate with children in a candid and age-appropriate manner about the changes that may be about to occur, or are actively occurring, in relation to their housing. This enabled educators to both understand the child's needs and convey to the child their options. As experienced by many educators, the absence of an explanation often led children to feel heightened levels of anxiety and affected their overall well-being.

Whetu spoke about the importance of open communication with children, and she said that children need to be informed about what is happening with an appropriate level of detail. Whetu believed that children understand a lot more than people think they do; therefore, if parents were to explain the situation and clarify that it might only be for a little while until the whānau find a place to move to, children would better understand what is happening, and this would potentially alleviate some of the stress, harm, and trauma they are likely to feel. From Whetu's perspective, based on her 40 years of experience as an educator, parents think they can shield their children from housing insecurity situations by not telling them what is happening. However, this is more likely to exacerbate the negative impact on them.

Whetu explained that children cannot always grasp timeframes. In her experience, this can lead children to start to "worry about whether they have somehow caused the issue," and she has heard them ask questions such as "Do I have to do something to change it?" "Have I done something wrong?" "Is this something that's on me?" Whetu believed that, if the significant adults, specifically whānau and educators, are "straight up" with children when their whānau is experiencing housing insecurity, and if they explain the situation, then it can cut through some of the self-doubt and uncertainty that can lead children to ask, "What could I have done better?" Whetu further explained that a lack of communication with children can lead them to worry about whether their actions are

causing strain in their whānau, even though they have no control over the situation the whānau is facing.

Rhonda echoed this idea, although she noted that, in the special school context, the child's disability can sometimes be a contributing factor to communication difficulties. Rhonda's experience illustrates the counterpoint to the usefulness of candid communication, given that it can be difficult to explain to children in the special school context what is happening. Rhonda reported that, generally speaking, neither the educator nor the parent can explain to the child why things are not going as they want them to, why they must move, or how long it will take. This means that, from Rhonda's perspective, "the difference for our kids at a specialist school is you can't say to them, 'We're going to live in this house for a few weeks, and then, you know, this is good.' They don't understand that. They just think that their whole world has literally been tipped upside down because it has."

Rhonda also discussed the role of communication when a student transitions from one class to the next within the school. She used this example to illustrate the impact that a significant change in one environment (the school) has on the children's home life. The school places high importance on communicating and preparing the child for the change to minimise the disruption at home. She described the process as follows: "When we move a child from one class to another, we do so much work with them. We take photos and we take videos, we take them to visit. We do this whole transition, because we know the distress it can cause." Rhonda explained that the impact of a change in one environment on the other is applicable in reverse. She was aware that children experiencing sudden changes or upheaval in their home environment due to housing insecurity or homelessness were often dysregulated and distressed when they were at school.

4.4.2 The Impact of Missing Communication Between Educators and Whānau

Open and transparent two-way communication between educators and whānau is also important. Rhonda explained that the agencies directly involved in housing and supporting whānau with children who have special needs do not seem to understand that, when the home situation is disrupted, there is a "ricochet effect" of negative impacts on the child, the whānau, and their school engagement. When a sudden housing change

occurs, the whānau can feel overwhelmed and "extremely distressed" or too embarrassed to explain what is happening. In school, Rhonda would recognise when child became distracted, distressed, and tired. As a considerable number of the school's students were non-verbal, they were not necessarily able to communicate to their educators what was going on. The school would then reach out to whānau in an effort to understand any underlying causes of the child's behavioural dysregulation, at which point the whānau often disclosed that they had experienced a crisis involving the loss of housing. Rhonda, Whetu, Marilyn, and Huia all considered that the processes employed by housing organisations can contribute to parents' being reluctant to inform the school about a child's living situation and needs. Rhonda said, "The whānau have been literally picked up and popped into some temporary housing situation, and then everyone walks away, and literally, it implodes for the child, for the parents."

Educators believed that clear two-way communication between schools and whānau can have a positive impact on children when a sudden move to emergency, transitional, or insecure housing is required. The presence of communication can be a stabilising and reassuring force for children and whānau.

4.4.3 Importance of Communication Within and Between Schools, and Between Schools and Housing Organisations

Educators were clear that the importance of open communication extends beyond the relationship between the child and the educator to include the child and whānau, whānau and educators, whānau and support agencies or organisations, and support agencies or organisations and educators/schools. Miriam spoke about the issues with the lack of communication between classroom educators and senior leadership, when the latter of whom have information about the home situations of children in an educator's classroom. According to Miriam, a lack of in-school communication can mean that a child is placed under challenging conditions in the classroom, which impacts how they feel about themselves and/or their place in the learning space. The following small story illustrates the impact of this lack of communication.

Miriam was out of her class for her classroom release time to complete one-on-one assessments with her students. One of the activities Miriam prepared for the release-educator asked the children to draw a map of the floor plan of their home and identify the exits they could use in case of a fire. One of the children sat quietly

at their table, not participating or talking to the other children. The release-educator asked the child if they needed help, and eventually, the child told the release-educator that they couldn't draw a plan because they didn't live in a house. After the release-educator explained the situation to Miriam, Miriam went and collected the child. Once they were alone, Miriam asked the child about the activity and what they meant by not living in a house. The child disclosed that they, their parents, and their siblings lived in a detached garage belonging to a whānau member. When Miriam went to speak to senior leadership about the information the child had shared, she discovered that senior leadership was already aware of it. Miriam said that this was frustrating. Having the information about the child's living situation would have allowed Miriam to organise the day's learning activities in such a way that the child would not have felt upset by a task they could not complete while their peers completed it around them.

The issue of communication between schools was raised by many of the educators. While some discussion points focused on the ability of schools to provide wraparound support to address unmet needs, educators also emphasised the importance of strengthening communication pathways between schools concerning a child's academic progress and achievement. Educators acknowledged that it can be challenging for the children to maintain engagement in learning programmes as they may arrive at a new school in the middle of a learning unit with no previous experience regarding that topic, or, as Miriam noted, they may have already completed a very similar unit of learning. Both of these situations can further contribute to a child becoming disengaged and disinterested in participating in the learning space. Some educators were proactive in engaging in inter-school communication to address this issue. For example, Kelly described how she proactively created a communication pathway for a child who needed to change schools due to housing insecurity.

Kelly felt she was in a unique position as a reading recovery educator to track a child's academic progress. She mentioned that, when a child is enrolled in the reading recovery learning intervention, there is an expectation that the reading recovery educator continues monitoring and checking in with the child for 3 years after the child has discontinued active intervention. This includes the scenario where the child moves to another school, as the reading recovery information remains in their file, and the follow-up is intended to be picked up by the reading

recovery educator at the new school. However, in the instance Kelly described, the child was enrolled in a school that did not run the Reading Recovery programme. However, Kelly passed on the child's reading recovery information by setting up a meeting and visiting the new school to meet with and speak to the child's classroom educator and to provide them with all the information she had. Kelly said that this was done in the hope that the new classroom educator could use the information to support positive progress in the child's reading achievement.

In another example, Melissa said that her Kahui Ako worked on communication between schools, which extended to activities to support transitions from primary schools to the local high school. In Melissa's opinion, this created a bridge between educational contexts to help with continuity, which can be an important support for children experiencing housing instability and concerns about their housing situation. As she explained,

> So even with kids in Year 6, with high needs, I start talking to them about how we support [moving to] college, and there's some of the things that are soft transition, like going to tech, and then some of the things are more formalised, and as we get closer to [the time they will change] we'll visit with you and all that sort of thing, and we'll make a plan. We talk about the success of previous students.

4.4.4 Communication — Summary

Throughout the interviews, the educators consistently expressed their view that clear and thorough communication is an integral part of understanding the current needs and previous experiences of children and whānau, as well as children's social well-being, learning needs, and progress. Communication that prioritises educators being fully informed can enable them to protect the well-being of the child and to fully grasp the child's current achievement and ability to focus on learning goals. The educators emphasised that it is essential for whānau to feel able to share important information and for schools to ensure that everyone who needs to know it has access to it. Additionally, they stressed the importance of providing continued support and access to resources for whānau, and establishing support networks for those being displaced from their communities due to housing insecurity or homelessness. Communication between schools and whānau, between educators within the school, between educators and their

learners, and between schools and support organisations was identified by the educators as an essential component of meeting the needs of children and whānau experiencing housing insecurity, as well as the work of educators within the education system.

4.5 Belongingness

Many educators spoke about the development of, or the feeling of, belonging as a significant factor when working with, and thinking about the needs of, children and whānau experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. Marilyn said that, when she welcomed in new students impacted by homelessness, her "key word for our children was belonging, and for them to belong." Educators discussed the following aspects of belongingness: (i) belongingness as a facilitator of positive self-belief and the building of relationships; (ii) belongingness impacted by a lack of access to stable housing; (iii) community belongingness as a protective factor in addressing housing insecurity; (iv) the harm of losing belongingness once it has been established; (v) belongingness as a barrier; and (vi) belongingness as an enabler for successful educational engagement and outcomes.

4.5.1 Belonging as a Facilitator of Positive Self-Belief and Building Relationships

One of the consistent points educators raised was that a strong sense of belonging, specifically a child's feeling of belonging, is an important factor in establishing positive self-belief and positive relationships. Educators discussed how educational environments often provide aspects that support belonging, such as offering a consistent place to spend time, fostering the creation of friendships with peers and positive relationships with trusted adults, and creating a safe environment where a sense of belonging can be fostered among peers. All the educators expressed that, if children do not feel as though they belong or have not had the opportunity to spend enough time in one place to build connections, they struggle to connect with educators and peers, as well as with learning programmes and the wider community. Brooke illustrated this point when she shared the story of a student who enrolled in her school after an extended period of homelessness and housing insecurity. The child was just completing their third term, and Brooke shared that they "only just started to form like, sort of like friendships and like relationships with [their] peers. They had [their] first [ever] play date" when they were 7 years old.

4.5.2 Belongingness Impacted by a Lack of Access to Stable Housing

Several educators mentioned that a lack of accessible housing can prevent a child from maintaining enrolment in the same school. It can also prevent a child from remaining with their whānau in their community. Both of these circumstances can have a negative impact on a child's ability to establish a sense of belonging. Across multiple regions, educators shared the issues whānau faced in finding and maintaining housing. Lydia spoke about the way that commuters to a large city were "push[ing] up house prices, and also more so the rentals, and noticed a drop in our students. Because whereas one moment we had an abundance of rentals, suddenly they're all being bought up, and that is at an all-time high, numerous whānau struggling to find rent."

Moana worked in an area where there had been a significant amount of social housing with stable tenancies, and she shared that

> there was already lots of state houses, but the old 60s, 70s state houses. So what has been happening is they decommission them, and so they'll decommission them many at a time, so they just, when they are vacated, they just don't get re-tenanted, so you end up with a street of houses that get closed down.

Moana went on to say that, while there are building plans for high-density residential housing, people from the community are still being priced out of tenancy, let alone home ownership.

When considering the importance of establishing a sense of belonging, Huia spoke specifically about how this impacts Māori students, as her school's roll comprised 85% Māori students. The whānau in the school community generally had a whakapapa connection to the area through iwi affiliation, meaning they had whānau, close grandparents, great-grandparents, aunties, uncles, and cousins all in relatively close proximity. Huia believed that, as there was not enough infrastructure being built into the area to create sustainable, accessible housing for the whānau who whakapapa to that land, the land that should be their "tūrangawaewae" (place to stand) had become an unattainable space for them to belong and live with stability and security. In Huia's experience of working with these whānau, she learned that they do not want their stay in emergency housing to be permanent: they want to get back to their community; they want

to get back to their social support networks; they want to get back to their whānau support networks; and they want to be able to attend school physically.

4.5.3 Community Belongingness as a Protective Factor in Avoiding Homelessness

Many of the educators described how community belongingness can also be viewed as a protective factor for whānau and children. They often expressed that, when an individual or whānau has a strong sense of belonging within the community, this provides a protective element against aspects of housing insecurity.

One way this can manifest is through the actions and support provided by the school community. Hinemoa shared that, because her school's special character was directly linked to the local iwi and had strong connections to local marae, the school community was primarily comprised of whānau that whakapapa to the area. This meant that, in addition to having a connection to the other children at the school through whānau ties, the children and whānau also felt a wider sense of belonging , as generations were raised and remained in the same community. Hinemoa believed that the connections between the staff in the school also being members of the community, and the generational ties within the community, created a strong foundation for belonging. Hinemoa identified this foundation of belonging as a protective factor for the whānau experiencing housing insecurity as they would be supported by the school, iwi, marae, and community organisations to remain within the community if they lost their housing, "because there is a connection to whenua and, you know, these core little whānau … having to be creative around how to stay together, and because there are components of Māori land still here for some of them, that's how we do it."

Theresa, who worked at an area school in a relatively isolated rural area, also considered that belongingness was a protective factor that could help whānau avoid homelessness, though this did not mean that a whānau would not experience housing insecurity. To illustrate this point, Theresa shared the story of a whānau of seven where the parents had some medical and mental health conditions that affected their ability to maintain housing. Theresa said, "They have moved at least six times in six years … and some of those [moves] are like twice a year. So, there's lots of reasons for that. And unfortunately, those reasons have kind of expanded over time. … But we are a small community, and they've always managed to get somewhere else to stay."

At one point, when the whānau were facing imminent homelessness, a local farming whānau offered their old farmhouse. It was abandoned and poorly insulated, but solid overall, and the community rallied to make the house as liveable as possible within a short timeframe.

4.5.4 The Importance of Building Belongingness and the Harm of Losing Belongingness Once It Has Been Established

The majority of the educators acknowledged that one of the most important things they did when working with children experiencing housing insecurity was to help foster their sense of belongingness as quickly as possible. The educators acknowledged that the downside to this approach was that, once a child began to feel a sense of belonging, the loss of that sense due to another move or housing insecurity could be particularly distressing.

Melissa shared a story about one child she worked with that closely connected to the harm that can come from losing a sense of belonging. This short story details a situation that illustrates how a child feels when faced with losing the sense of belonging they had just established.

> *The whānau arrived in the school community by moving into cabin-like buildings on land next to the local marae. For reasons unknown to Melissa, a falling out occurred between the parent and the manager of the cabins, resulting in the whānau being evicted. The oldest child, who was in Year 8, their last year at primary school before heading to high school, had attended 10 primary schools before arriving at the school where Melissa worked. Melissa (in her role as LSC), the school staff, and other organisations and agencies had rallied together and established a support network before the eviction occurred. This provided the child with opportunities that they had not had before, including coaching younger students and acting as a mentor. Melissa said the child was thriving in their school experience, and, as a result, they desperately wanted not to leave the school. However, due to the eviction, the whānau was relocated to emergency housing that was over 20 minutes away. This child negotiated with their parent to be driven back each day so that they could continue to attend the school and complete the current term. As Melissa explained,*

Mum is still driving them back every day because the older boy feels so comfortable here, he didn't want to give up his coaching he was doing with younger students, so mum had agreed to drive them back every day until the end of the term, and then at the end of the term, they'll go again, and that'll be his 12th school. And he's in Year 8. He'd been stood down before from previous schools, but here we've managed to, he's been pretty amazing, really."

4.5.5 Existing Community Belongingness as a Barrier to Establishing Belonging When Experiencing Housing Insecurity

The educators identified that a sense of belonging can act as a barrier, as someone who lacks it may end up feeling isolated and othered, and tight-knit communities can feel be challenging to join. According to the educators, when children do not feel they belong within the wider community, it can impede progress towards learning goals or building positive relationships. The concept of belongingness as a barrier is captured by this quote from Lydia, as she discussed the experiences of children in insecure housing: "How do you communicate, or what have you, with your peers if you're constantly having to rebuild who you are and walk into a foreign environment going over and over again. Like it must be a very daunting feeling." Moana also shared a story that illustrated this idea, where she described the relatively small community in which the school she worked was located. The school had an in-zone "holiday park" with cabins, communal kitchens, and bathrooms that had been turned into emergency and transitional housing.

Everybody who lived permanently in the community knew that that location, which had previously only been inhabited by whānau holidaying, was now emergency housing. There were also aspects of living within that facility that were known by the educators and some members of the community, such as 48-hour evictions and stringent rules, which created a sense of "other" between the people living in the emergency housing facility and the people who did not. Furthermore, Moana stated that everyone in the community was aware that there were no residential homes in the vicinity of the holiday park. This meant that if anybody was coming from one direction towards or away from the school, community members, both children and adults, knew that they were living in emergency housing. Every time those whānau, whether it was the children on their own or parents walking their

children, started the walk to school or the walk home from school, they knew that everybody in the community who saw them knew they were going back to their emergency housing.

From Moana's perspective, this situation fostered a barrier of belonging due to the way that the town was laid out, and it created a situation in which the children were unlikely to feel like they were part of the rest of the community. Moana's opinion was that they were being othered by the very location of the housing solution being offered to them.

4.5.6 Long-Term Belongingness as an Enabler to Successful Outcomes Despite Experiencing Housing Insecurity

Although some educators recognised the potential for belongingness to act as a barrier, they also suggested that long-term belongingness can be an enabler to successful outcomes. They elaborated upon this by explaining that, if a child and whānau have a sense of belongingness and are accepted where they are and for who they are, then they can feel secure in expressing their needs and accepting help. From the educators' perspectives, belongingness can, for example, help facilitate a child's progress towards learning goals, the building of positive relationships, and personal aspirations.

The ability to remain within a community and school environment was identified as a positive element for the child, even in adverse housing situations. Theresa spoke of this perspective, and is captured in this small story expanding on her quote in section 4.5.3,

Community support became a crucial factor in enabling success, particularly for the oldest child in the whānau. Due to other whānau issues, the oldest child had taken on a significant amount of caregiving and parental responsibilities. Theresa mentioned that this child had been highly motivated to attend school from a very young age, and she shared that the child had many educators supporting them as they progressed through their school years all at the same school due to it being an area school. This meant that, as they got older, the student would at times go and speak to the educators whom they had established positive relationships with about how they felt overwhelmed because they were trying to keep up with certain aspects of their schoolwork. Theresa said that the student would explain they were struggling due to the other pressures they faced, and the school rallied to put as

many supports and resources as possible in place for this child. The school covered the costs of uniforms, school trips, and stationery. The school also sent home food for the student and their whānau. Theresa said that the school were supporting this child to engage in as many extra educational opportunities as the child wanted. When the now-teenaged student expressed their desire to go to university to pursue their area of interest, the educators within the school did everything they could to help this young person access that opportunity. Theresa explained this involved the school creating a scholarship, and community organisations also gave them a scholarship. The educators helped the student apply for other scholarships and to identify and access further resources. The totality of the student's hard work and achievement and the support from their school and community meant that their entire first year of university, including living costs and fees, were covered.

Theresa believed that, because the student's sense of belonging was fostered consistently within the community, and because they were in a place where they were supported and accepted for who they were and where the circumstances in which they were operating were understood, the outcomes for the individual were very different to what they might have been had such belongingness not existed. Marilyn, when reiterating the importance she placed on belonging, said, "I've had these little mantras up there [points to office wall], my goals, yeah, you know, 'diversity is a fact, equity is a choice, inclusion is an action, belonging is the outcome.'"

4.5.7 Belongingness — Summary

As Theresa, Hinemoa, Marilyn, Melissa, Ken, and Huia all discussed, a strong sense of belongingness has a role in mitigating some of the harm and challenges that come from insecure housing or homelessness during childhood. As Hinemoa pointed out, the strong connections available to the whānau and children who were members of the school community by virtue of the school's special character tie to local iwi created a safety net of belonging that helped catch these whānau and their children before they had to leave the area for housing.

4.6 The role of an Educator's Lived Experience

A concept that multiple educators raised was the role that their lived experiences played in making connections with children and whānau experiencing housing insecurity. Several spoke about their own lived experience of housing insecurity, poverty, or domestic violence, indicating they felt that the things they experienced as a child gave them a way to relate to, and speak with, children and their whānau. This section focuses on three aspects of an educator's lived experiences: (i) specific shared experiences and cultural backgrounds, (ii) lived experience within a connected range, and (iii) knowing what experiences are and are not shared.

4.6.1 Specific Shared Experiences and Cultural Backgrounds

Two educators, one from a large city and one from a small semi-rural township, spoke about the positive impact that being from Māori culture and looking stereotypically Māori had on their ability to form connections and create positive relationships with Māori students and their whānau who were experiencing homelessness. Huia (a senior leader) noted that, when whānau came into her office, they would see her and let go any sense of resistance; they were willing to listen and, more importantly, willing to share. Huia said,

> "My good fortune when I'm dealing with our displaced community, in this instance, is I am Māori in my appearance, so it is reassuring for some of our whānau that come into my office in a state of resistance, and they just, you know, they haven't had positive experiences, neither of their parents, neither of their grandparents and parents before that. But it's nice and grounding when they come in and, you know, we look similar. Yes, so … my good fortune in this instance is that first barrier, it enables the whānau to instantly exhale, and then let's work out what are the real issues, and what can we control and deal with right now and then. What do we need to work towards next?

Conversely, Huia spoke about how this could result in negative interactions for other staff members, even when there was an underlying shared cultural heritage, which she was able to overcome initially due to her appearance.

> *Huia described the time that whānau came in to see her and, because they had not had good school experiences, presented very aggressively — venting their*

frustration to the school receptionist who, while being a wahine Māori, had "a light-skinned appearance." At first glance, the receptionist did not necessarily "look Māori." Huia said that, once the whānau saw her and were welcomed in and invited to talk, she was able to quickly address the issues raised by the whānau and explain how the school could help provide or source what was required.

Whetu also spoke about how her appearance as a Māori woman meant that, at times, the children in her class and at the school would be more open to communicating with her. Whetu stated that being Māori enabled her to form connections with some of the Māori students who had experienced housing insecurity:

> Some kids, I mean, this might sound a bit strange, but some kids, they know that, knowing that I've got brown skin, they just come up to me and because they [think] "you're like me," you know. And that's something that you know. You think, "oh, well, it doesn't matter" … but they've got something that they feel like [they can connect to].

In this way, Huia's and Whetu's connection to their culture, their appearance, and their lived experience as Māori enabled them to get support in place and allowed whānau to feel seen and understood in education spaces. For Whetu, her cultural connections combined with her having had similar childhood experiences of housing insecurity meant she was able to empathise and speak with understanding to validate the feelings of the children, as these aspects of her identity added extra points of connection to and comfort for the children.

4.6.2 Lived Experience Within a Connected Range

Lived experiences of childhood adversity can help forge connections between people who have experienced various types of adversity and have been impacted in different ways. Ken explained that he would sometimes share parts of his experience with the children who had experienced or were experiencing homelessness to enable them to feel they could ask for the things that they needed, whether it was a break because they were tired or something to eat because they were hungry. Ken also mentioned that, once he moved into a senior leadership position, he became proactive in contacting and visiting whānau. Ken was originally from the community in which he was teaching; he had been at this school for his entire career and had no intention of leaving. This meant that Ken

had deep connections to the town and school. What follows is the final part of the story we started with Ken that we left off in section 4.3.2.

> *Discussing the role of his own lived experience, Ken spoke about a whānau that had 10 children, including a toddler and a baby. The children from this whānau had started missing school. Up to this point, two of the children had already gone through the intermediate school (where Ken works) with relatively consistent attendance. The child who was currently enrolled was not attending. Ken went to the home on the enrolment forms. He was greeted by the father of the whānau, who said, "What the fuck do you want?" The father would not let him past the gate. Ken acknowledged that, at first glance, in his dress pants and button-down shirt, which were his standard work attire, he came across as someone who could potentially look down on the whānau. Ken described the building of the relationship as "baby steps, going from being at the gate to being at the steps to being at the door." The breakthrough that was the key to becoming almost part of this whānau was when he told them that, while he was currently an adult with a career and wore dress pants and a button-down shirt, he was also just a guy who used to be a kid whose home life was not great, who often went to school hungry, and who had battled through his challenges to get to where he was. The children now refer to him as "Uncle," and even though they moved away to a larger city about 40 minutes away, Ken remains involved with the whānau as part of their support network.*

Whetu also has lived experience from her childhood of being removed from her whānau home, being moved between homes, and being separated from her siblings and parent because of unstable housing and family dysfunction. She also had to attend many different schools. When discussing how this helped her connect with whānau and children, Whetu said,

> If I'm talking to someone and they've been in that situation, I tell them, "Well, I've been through this." And they go, "Oh," and they're more accepting of you because you've already been through it. And [they ask], "Well, how did you get through that?" And I'll say, "This is what happened. This is what I did. I didn't give up. I went back to school," you know?

The educators explained that it was ultimately up to the individual to determine what they did and did not feel comfortable sharing. However, the ability to relate to children and whānau through lived experience was identified as an overall positive by the educators who spoke about their lived experience specifically during their interviews. Their perspective was that being able to share and relate personal experiences of adversity also helped them provide information more effectively for whānau to learn about available support and build a sense of optimism that things would improve from their current situation.

4.6.3 Knowing What Experiences Are and Are Not Shared

The educators all had lived experiences that shaped their perspectives on their role and the circumstances the students and their whānau faced. As well as the experiences that educators had in common with their students, a key point was raised about understanding what experiences — not necessarily adversity-based — an educator did *not* have in common with their learners.

Huia spoke about the importance of understanding the breadth of realities for a whānau. She used the example of a conversation with a colleague who had never caught a bus before to illustrate this point. Huia said that this "blew [her] mind" because it was something that the children in their school experienced daily and most people in their community had experienced. However, Huia did not believe that this meant the educator without a shared lived experience was unable to connect with children and whānau. This was because staff in schools across Huia's Kahui Ako were currently receiving opportunities to complete a range of professional learning and development that focused on trauma-informed practices. Marilyn and Melissa also shared their experiences of undertaking professional development with psychologists to develop trauma-informed pedagogy and understanding. The sentiment about this kind of professional development was that it enabled educators to explore their own experiences, assumptions, and biases and to become more aware of how they can support children and whānau. The ongoing conversations around experiences and trauma-informed, culturally responsive practice had led Huia to make some connections between the value in both the experiences they had in common and the experiences they did not.

> *Huia pointed out that she needed to be mindful of some of the biases she had towards the "forward-facing persona" of the professional learning development*

(PLD) presenters and the strategies they promote. Huia said that, sometimes, she has to be aware that, even if most of what was being presented and promoted seemed "sort of obvious and simplistic," that did not mean that there were no educators who needed to hear it. It also did not mean that there was nothing she could take away as learning for herself. Huia also spoke about the fact that, when she had attended larger PLD conferences, she has thought, "Oh, well, why do I have to be here because I know all of this?" But she recognised that these feelings can sometimes get in the way, so she set aside her ego and her bias based on her experiences, and looked for the snippets of learning to take back that would sharpen her craft and extend her ability.

4.6.4 Lived Experience — Summary

In sharing their experiences, the educators featured in this section made clear that they did not believe educators could only be successful in working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness if they had similar personal childhood experiences. All the educators whose stories are shared here believed that any educator could be a strong support and make positive connections with children and whānau. However, understanding how adverse experiences could impact children and whānau was identified by each of the educators as a positive factor in their ability to connect with, and ultimately support, the children and whānau in their schools.

4.7 Picking up the Slack from the System

As the school is the one system that the whānau is legally required to check in with consistently, educators viewed themselves as being on the front lines — providing support to children and the children's significant adults. All the participating educators voiced the perspective that there are a lot of expectations put on schools, and therefore on the educators, which come from failures that occur within other structures and systems in Aotearoa. This, they said, means that educators are at times expected to pick up the slack from the health system, the housing system, Oranga Tamariki, and the Ministry of Social Development. All of this impacted their work as educators, but they noted that it also put them in a unique position to see the harm that occurs when these systemic failures are present in the lives of the children they work with. It also equipped them to work towards mitigating harm and finding solutions for children and their whānau.

At times, the educators' role as trusted adults and their relationships with the child and their whānau placed them in positions where they needed to make decisions that require them to draw on their own resources. Educators described various ways they stepped in to provide support, resources, or advocacy to whānau in crisis. Many educators said that they focused on utilising the resources and support to which whānau had access in order to create opportunities and as much stability and security as possible for children and their whānau. The educators believed that supporting children without understanding the wider context and needs of the whānau is less likely to be as effective.

Many of the educators clearly stated that they did not work solely with the child or focusing on in-school actions or activities in situations where a whānau had been significantly impacted by or was at a crisis point due to homelessness. Rather, they operated as liaisons, facilitators, advocates, and educators.

Overall, the educators expressed the opinion that children are generally very perceptive, so when children see their parents or caregivers upset, then they are more likely to feel upset. Huia explained that the distress in the home situation often leads the entire whānau to a place where they require support.

4.7.1 Housing

Several educators shared their thoughts about the failure of housing organisations and agencies to recognise the needs of a whānau when providing them with support and to ensure the housing solution met these needs. Many of the educators spoke of the way that a whānau may become homeless very quickly.

In some situations, tamariki are moved away from the community and school they have known, which creates a distance from everything they know and barriers to maintaining attendance at the same school. In some instances the child is separated from their whānau due to a lack of housing. When discussing the separation of children from their whānau, Whetu said,

> It feels like we should have more housing, even if it's interim housing, that they can go to as a family, that there's more support in that area, or maybe there's, I don't know, hostels or something that's closer, so that they're not tearing [whānau] apart, and the child doesn't feel like … it's a lost cause or lost situation.

Rhonda discussed this point in relation to her school, which catered to children with significant needs and disabilities. When sharing her experience working with one particular whānau, Rhonda said that a child needing to have their own bedroom is a challenging thing to explain to an organisation:

> [Having their own room is] really important for this particular [student], and that's really hard to explain to an organisation. Well, we can, you know, you've got, you've got four kids, put two in each room. Some of our kids just cannot self-regulate that way, you know … when the parent says they need a three-bedroom house, they're not saying it because they want a nice, bigger house. They're saying it because of the needs of the kids

Given her role in a special school, Rhonda had experience with a range of issues that came up, including gaps in the health and disability sectors and the intersection of these with housing insecurity.

When a family received the offer of a house, they found themselves in a situation where they would have two disabled children who would have to stay home because they could not go to school if they moved to the house being offered. The parents decided to decline the offered home and explained their reasoning to the agency. Not long after this, the family brought the official letter to the school, telling them that because they had said "no," they were at the bottom of the list to receive housing. The school began working with the family and wrote a letter to fight the decision.

Rhonda pointed out that this was another task that, in theory, was not part of an educator's job description. However, for Rhonda and her school, such a situation could not be excluded from their responsibilities and obligations.

The reality of whānau being expected to live in homes that do not meet basic requirements was highlighted in a story shared by Theresa. This story is told in two parts, it begins here and concludes in section 4.7.2. Theresa spoke about a child at her school who was living with their primary caregiver, an extended whānau member.

> *One of the limiting resources they were dealing with was the fact that the housing they were in was inadequate to meet the needs of the whānau. Additionally, for health reasons, the caregiver needed to sleep in a bed. The availability of space in the home meant that the youngest child did not have a bed or bedroom. The*

whānau had a system in place; when it was bedtime for the youngest child, the child would go to bed in the caregiver's bedroom and sleep. When the caregiver needed to go to bed, the child was then moved from the caregiver's bed and placed on the couch to sleep for the rest of the night. The fact that this child did not have a space of their own within their home, and their sleep was interrupted every night, was identified by the school's educators as impacting the child's well-being.

Theresa made it clear that the caregiver was trying to do the best that they could, whilst having limited resources.

Melissa spoke about was the fact that housing insecurity sometimes means that children are moved away from the rest of their whānau because the parents are unable to keep all or any of their children with them. She mentioned "another [child] who came back this year, mum is unable to look after [them], and so [the child] has moved in with aunty." Melissa said she had seen quite a few instances where individual children are moved, rather than the whole whānau, and in the school community, there are many grandparents caring for children. Additionally, having emergency motel housing in the school zone meant that sometimes the children they received had been at the school before. They were moved away from the school and community and, sometime later, were moved back in. As a result, Melissa quite often saw children multiple times, which highlights the issue of homelessness being a recurrent cycle, rather than a one-off situation, for many whānau.

Huia raised her concerns about the level of trauma and insecurity whānau have to experience before they are able to access housing support. She acknowledged that a larger issue is at play regarding the number of houses available in her area. She went on to say,

> Before you even get to the list of emergency housing, I'm very aware that you actually have to be without any type of housing option. So most of our whānau in this instance have had to state that they are physically living in their cars in all the different places around [town].

Rhonda shared a story about what happens when things go right. She spoke about a whānau with multiple children with disabilities who received a home that did meet their needs; once they were in the home, the whānau could "breathe" at last. That is, their stress

of experiencing homelessness no longer impacted their children and therefore the focus of the school could change.

> Now it's when [they] get home, it's the same house … they're all set. They've got their house that was appropriately set up for them with fencing, and so then we've got [students] who are now more settled, more engaged, attaining coming to school every day. I mean, the only time they don't come as if they're really sick, there's no other social reason for them, not [to attend]. The difference, particularly in the oldest [child of the whānau] who had been kicked out of two schools … [he] is now attending every day. He's, you know, he's happy. He's got a set routine. The difference in him now [is that] all we're worried about is his education.

Marilyn shared a story about how her school had begun working on a plan using school resources to address housing insecurity in the community. This story is shared in its entirety here, as it is an example of the ways that schools are planning and acting outside of their remit as "education spaces" to provide practical social support in their communities. These actions are being undertaken because educators understand that addressing housing insecurity will have a positive impact. In telling this story, Marilyn mentioned that the school had acreage, most of which was road frontage.

> *The school community wanted to put relocatable homes on the land and then have people who needed a home come in and participate in renovating them. This would ensure that these houses met all the requirements of a healthy home, and the people involved would also learn how to do house maintenance. The process was intended to offer affordable housing that would lead to ownership; the whānau would be supported to purchase the home at the cost of the subdivision fee and the house. Well into the planning process, there was a government change, and the school was told they could no longer follow through on their planning. However, as the principal at a school whose community members were impacted by housing insecurity, Marilyn asserted that their affordable housing plan was the actual solution to improving attendance, accelerating educational progress, and increasing academic achievement. She also insisted that finding a way to provide stable housing to people in their community was more relevant to improving achievement outcomes than trying to implement a new literacy programme.*

The private rental market has a significant impact on the housing insecurity that many whānau face, a point that was raised by Hinemoa and Lydia. Lydia discussed the fact that their small town had become a popular commuting area for a nearby large city; as a result, over the last 6 years, whānau have experienced significant rent increases. Many whānau in the community had lost their homes due to rent becoming unaffordable, and they struggled to find another rental in the community they belonged to. This issue was also exacerbated by the actions of individuals in the private rental sector. Lydia explained that the stress parents felt as each inspection or tenancy renewal period approached was significant, and this translated to the children's behaviour at school and, at times, a gap in attendance as the household struggled.

Rhonda said that, in situations of homelessness, whānau eventually become so stressed that they believe whatever decision they make is going to be the wrong decision. If they choose housing that does not meet the needs of their disabled or special needs child but enables their other children to have bedrooms and go to the local school, then they feel that they are taking educational opportunities away from their special needs child. However, if they choose to stay where they are so that the special needs child can continue to have the stability of the school environment, they are then depriving their other children of the opportunity for stable housing. Rhonda asserted that it was a challenging place for the parents to be in; she found it heartbreaking and suggested that it would feel like a "choice of self-destruction" for some whānau.

Several educators spoke about the issues they saw in the way housing developments were being created and the impact these developments had on school communities. Moana's story of the transitional housing facility, shared in Section 4.4.3, is an example of the impact of a housing development on the people in the housing and the school community. Rhonda spoke about being aware of an area on the outskirts of her city where housing was being built for whānau. While acknowledging that this was great in theory, Rhonda believed that the location of these homes would prevent disabled children who lived with their whānau in this housing from attending the main campus or any of the satellite units. Rhonda said that, for parents who see the positives that the school environment provides for their children with significant needs, this is almost an impossible decision to make. Rhonda also believed that, at the council level, there needs to be a greater understanding of the people in their community so that they can provide housing that suits the client base. Rhonda worked at a special school in a large city; it had

been there for decades and was a well-established entity within the community. As the local government and agencies were aware of its main campus and satellite units, Rhonda did not understand why they failed to consider the possibility that whānau who relied on the school may need emergency housing. She contended that organisations and agencies should take account of these needs of whānau, rather than applying a "generic formula" when planning emergency housing. This, she believed, was especially important given that whānau are often too scared to say anything in case they end up getting nothing. Rhonda believed that information about the requirements for children with disabilities should be part of the intake questions organisations and agencies ask when they engage with these whānau.

4.7.2 Ministry of Social Development, Oranga Tamariki, and Support Services

Many of the educators who participated in this research noted that often whānau experiencing homelessness have engaged with the Ministry of Social Development (MSD) through various agencies and organisations. These engagements, as communicated to the educators by whānau, were often frustrating and overwhelming. According to several educators, after going through a series of potentially distressing interactions, whānau take a negative view of the MSD and associated agencies and organisations, and they distrust any organisation with authority.

The educators shared that there were times when the long waits or extensive time commitments needed to attend appointments contributed to the very crisis a whānau was trying to avoid. As mentioned earlier, the educators shared that their experiences led them to understand that, often, the crises that results in a loss of housing arise without warning. To illustrate this point, Whetu shared a story, which is included in full here; it highlights the complexity and urgency that can underpin the actions and choices educators must make on short notice and with limited information.

> *Whetu spoke about a child in her class who had not been collected at the end of the day. School staff could not could get in touch with the child's parents, and when the child was asked where they were staying that night, they said they were not quite sure. Whetu said this was entirely out of character for this whānau. Later, Whetu found out that they had lost their housing. Both parents were desperately trying to find a solution. They were in waiting rooms or meetings they*

did not feel they could leave, taking them well past the time school ended. Ultimately, the child stayed at Whetu's house for the night. Whetu had called the relevant agencies, and she recalled they had said, "We might be able to send somebody out, but we don't know." Whetu, the school, and the agency involved left a voicemail for both parents letting them know where and with whom the child was staying that night. The child was reunited with their parents at the end of school the following day. Due to the history of a strong, trusted relationship between Whetu, the child, and the whānau, the agencies were comfortable with Whetu taking the child home and ensuring they had food and shelter for the night. Whetu said, "I had to do something, because I couldn't leave the little [child]."

Several educators discussed the way that they worked with children impacted by housing insecurity or homelessness multiple times, as the whānau, or just the child, would go through what they called "cycles" of agency interventions that detrimentally impacted their living situations. The final part of Theresa's story, which began in section 4.7.1, illustrates this point.

While the child did not currently live with them, Theresa also had previous interactions with the child's parents and knew from this communication that the father was living a somewhat transient lifestyle and the child's mother had substance abuse and unaddressed mental health issues. At the time the events described by the Theresa occurred, neither of the parents lived in the community where the child was living, although they were in somewhat adjacent towns. While living with their caregiver, the child also consistently attended school and was a participating member of the school community. Then, for reasons unknown to Theresa, the child was taken from the caregiver by an involved agency and sent to live with their mother, meaning they had to be enrolled in a new school. This arrangement lasted for only 3 weeks before the situation was deemed unfit for the child by the same agency. The child was urgently uplifted and sent to live with their dad, who was living on a bus in another area, thereby necessitating another school change. The child, aged between 10 and 11 years, lived with their dad for a short amount of time before he kicked the child out. At this point, the child was returned to the original caregiver and the school and community they had been a part of. Theresa shared that this was not the first time the child had been through what she called a cycle of living with mum, being uplifted and placed with dad,

and then being uplifted or sent back to the whānau member who took over caregiving. Theresa believed that, after the most recent occurrence of this cycle, when the child was brought back to the caregiver, whose housing situation had not changed, the child came back to school "damaged" emotionally from the experience.

Huia also spoke about the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to support services. She noted that that the first thing the COVID-19 lockdowns and aftermath taught her was that the school needed to work out how to return to the skills of their tupuna to ensure the community could be self-sufficient with kai, because, in their location, they were cut off. Given everything Huia saw and experienced with their community, she said that, as a school, they were happy to connect with all the support agencies in their region if the needed support was unavailable locally. Huia said the school was open to having those conversations to work out what was required and then helping in that pursuit.

Huia believed it is essential to look at education and how schools serve Māori communities, especially considering how over-represented Māori are in both negative achievement statistics and in terms of homelessness and housing insecurity. Huia described herself several times as "an experienced Māori education practitioner" and said that she was speaking from a place where she "do[es] not feel that [she has] absolutely got everything right for Māori and [her] school community or the region at large, but that is what [she is] working toward … [and] it's so important to put egos aside because it's not about any one person, it's not a competition, it's about the wellness, the well-being of all."

According to several educators, support services often leave significant gaps, thus creating unmet needs. As schools are required to maintain contact with the whānau of enrolled children, they often end up being the ones to identify and meet those needs while trying to find more permanent solutions. One of the ways that several educators described doing this was through helping whānau set up appointments with support agencies and organisations. However, the educators were clear that setting up the appointments was not the endpoint of their help; the whānau also needed assistance to attend those appointments because sitting in an agency waiting room for hours with multiple children or, in one example from Rhonda, a severely autistic child, was not feasible. The whānau may not even be able to stay for the appointment. Rhonda said that, ultimately, whānau

may end up being left in emergency housing motel rooms for long periods, and parents of children at her school have informed her that they have been told by the agency or organisation that this is because they did not turn up to, or stay for, an appointment to sign forms or go and visit a house. Several educators believed there is a lack of awareness among organisations about why these things can happen to whānau — it is not a matter of just getting in the car and going. According to Rhonda, the social agencies that should be helping these whānau are becoming the barrier that the whānau are trying to overcome so that they can be in stable housing and have their children in school, thereby enabling the children to focus on achieving learning goals.

Melissa expressed that, in a lot of ways, her role as an LSC had become almost one of a social worker (a sentiment echoed by several other educators in their interviews) and that "learning support has also become pastoral support because the things that were happening for these whānau were impacting everything" that they were trying to do in the school. This meant that Melissa had at times worked closely with Oranga Tamariki, social workers, and other agencies, in addition to the resource teacher of learning and behaviour (RTLB), the resource teacher of literacy (RTLit), and Ministry of Education educational psychologists.

4.7.3 Health and Disability

Difficulties accessing healthcare or support for disabilities and chronic health conditions were described by the educators as a significant issue for the whānau they were working with. All the educators acknowledged that living with housing insecurity, or experiencing homelessness, is difficult and traumatic for all whānau. However, several of the educators asserted that gaps or barriers in the health and disability sectors and systems made housing insecurity or homelessness even more likely to occur for an extended period; therefore, the child's ability to be at school was severely impacted.

According to Hinemoa, her school had identified that whānau who were struggling while living in transitional housing and whose children had significant absenteeism were confronted with a barrier when trying to access medical care. This story, shared by Hinemoa, highlights the range of areas a school must explore as it seeks to understand and address in-school issues. It is therefore being shared in full here to illustrate this point.

> Our school and board of trustees did a memorandum with [the local public health and medical services body] so now we have nurses who are in once a week, who can check on Tamariki. We looked at attendance and why the children weren't coming to school, and the biggest barrier for us was medical. They [whānau] couldn't get access to the doctors — couldn't get in or couldn't afford it. So, we brought the nurses to the school. The nurses do throat swabs, and the doctors here are familiar with the fact that when you have children living with their [overcrowded] large whānau, that you don't just dose that one child [that tested positive for strep]. We have to dose everybody who is under the age of eight, and everyone gets swabbed. We have partnered with [a local organisation], and they come in and help with asthma workshops and other areas where the statistics show that Māori are more likely to experience those medical conditions. We also have really low immunisation rates amongst our students and whānau, so now we have an immunisation nurse. We are always looking for other ways to help support whānau. We have a well-being day once a term, where we invite agencies and organisations to come and we have a fun day where parents can just interact with all of these different organisations, and so do the students, so they'll go home and talk about it [with each other].

Marilyn spoke explicitly about the link between inadequate housing and the negative impact on whānau health. She was the primary contact person in her school and had become very close to a whānau as she worked alongside them to try and address all their needs.

> *The whānau were living in inadequate, cold, damp, overcrowded housing, and at 30 years old, the mother from this whānau passed away from influenza. Although the whānau situation had not been ideal from a housing perspective, the community rallied, and the whānau received other forms of support.*

Marilyn's opinion was that the children suffered an additional trauma, the loss of their mother, to an illness that was made worse by the inadequacy of the housing they lived in.

Rhonda said that, for parents with children at her school, experiencing homelessness and having children with a disability becomes a full-time job. Often, at least one parent (in a two-parent whānau) cannot work outside the home, and there is limited

support for them and their daily tasks. According to Rhonda, the school stepped up to facilitate many things for these whānau, which, technically, it was not responsible for. However, from Rhonda's perspective, the school could not ignore these issues. For example, members of the school's senior leadership team went out to source and deliver raincoats to the whānau so that they could come to school without jeopardising their health.

A key point Rhonda raised — which was echoed by Hinemoa, Huia, Marilyn, and Melissa — was that, unlike a social worker, educators are not trained to what support is provided by organisations and how they provide it. Therefore, it can take hours to make connections and facilitate support for learners and their whānau. Rhonda took this concept a step further, based on the context she worked in, and suggested that there needed to be a removal of "systemic stigmas." She believed it could make a big difference if educators asked whānau, "Is there anything else that we need to be aware of that is in your whānau? Are there additional needs?" while also ensuring that the people working in agencies and organisations understood what the answers to these questions meant. This opinion was based on her experiences of supporting parents and caregivers of children with disabilities as they navigated securing stable housing and balancing the needs of the children and the whānau . Rhonda's sharing of her experiences is reported in its entirety to illustrate the barriers that whānau can face, and how this impacts them.

> *Rhonda explained that a whānau is often offered a home that is not fit for purpose for the disabled children in their care. One example given was that a house might lack the modifications to enable a child in a wheelchair to access and navigate the home. As shared in section 4.7.1, Rhonda noted that if the whānau says, "Unfortunately, we cannot move to that home," they are often told by the housing agencies that they will be moved to the bottom of the list. From Rhonda's perspective, this suggests that parents' and caregivers' efforts to explain about and advocate for their disabled child are held against them Rhonda illustrated this point with the story of one child who had a big, solid wheelchair. Using ongoing resourcing scheme (ORS) funding, the child could travel to school in a taxi funded by the Ministry. A taxi driver had come in to the school to complain that he had hurt his back. The school learned that the whānau had been relocated to a new house that was only accessible via a flight of steps. This taxi driver had been carrying the child and the wheelchair down and up these steps every school*

day. When the school staff went to talk to the whānau to see if there was anything they could do to help, they were told by the whānau that they felt they could not say no to the home when it was offered despite the accessibility issue. The whānau said that, while their child could not get in and out of the front or back door, leading to the taxi driver having to lift him, they did not feel they could turn down this house because they had been told that, if they did so, they would be lowered on the priority list for housing. This situation had reached a point where, on the days when the taxi driver refused to help get the child and wheelchair out of the home, the child did not attend school. Rhonda pointed out that these needs for the children should not be unknown to the agencies working with the whānau. The agencies working with this whānau knew that he required a wheelchair accessible home, yet that was not part of the conversation when they were offered the house they were now living in. The whānau communicated that, even though the lack of a ramp made accessibility problematic, the rest of the house had a big bathroom and good doorways. With the ultimatum that they would not be offered another home, they were too scared to turn down the house, knowing what the alternative would be: an extended stay in emergency housing.

One positive thing Rhonda mentioned was that, through creating a partnership with the specialist teams at a hospital, the school now ran paediatric clinics. She believed that this was significant for the whānau, especially the children, as it meant that, even when housing was insecure and stressful, healthcare could still be provided in a location considered stable and safe for the child and their parents or caregivers. Rhonda acknowledged again that this was not technically within the scope of their role as a school, yet she asserted that it was an essential part of what they did to support the children and whānau in their school community. Rhonda also said that, because paediatricians were in the school, they could communicate with the educators and whānau about what was happening with their housing situations. As a result, the paediatricians had begun writing letters to the housing agencies and organisations on behalf of the whānau to explain the non-negotiable needs of the whānau, including their behavioural and medical needs, and to confirm that their current living situation was inappropriate. For Rhonda, one of the things that led her to add being an advocate for whānau to her responsibilities was seeing that the whānau had genuine and legitimate concerns and realising that, in many instances, the agencies and organisations were not listening.

4.7.4 Education

Notably, all the educators emphasised the lack of information from the Ministry of Education about working with and supporting children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Many noted that the New Zealand Curriculum, along with available professional development and programmes such as Positive Behaviour for Learning, acknowledged the importance of a school–learner–whānau partnership. However, there were no specific resources or guidelines to help schools and educators navigate working with whānau who were experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness, despite many reports acknowledging the increasing number of children living in emergency housing.

Melissa said that LSCs were intended to be people who took control of the learning support register to manage learning support and coordinate interventions for children with learning needs or disabilities. However, once she moved from her classroom teaching role into her LSC position, she realised that several students were on the learning support register because they struggled with emotional dysregulation. Melissa also noted that, before taking on her LSC role, she had "no idea just how much the socio-economic situation of a whānau, just how much impact that had on the child and their learning or their ability to be at school." She also identified a particular issue that had a significant impact on the school community, and therefore the children she was working with: when the COVID-19 lockdowns began, several motels in the "in zone" area became and have remained emergency housing. She mentioned during her interview that one of the whānau with children at her school had been in the motel for three and a half years.

Melissa spoke about the fact that many children on the learning support register had a current or previous experience with homelessness, and the majority of them were Māori students. She regularly took enrolment forms, backpacks, and school supplies to emergency housing motels in the school's zone to help create a connection between the school and the whānau living there. During a visit from the Education Review Office (ERO), Melissa was informed that all of the work she was doing by visiting the whānau, coordinating with third-party suppliers to source the backpacks and school supplies, facilitating the filling out of enrolment forms, and providing options for the children to get to school safely was "not her job." Melissa said she believed that her job, by definition, was to support children with identified needs (learning, behavioural, and others) to be at school and participate in learning programmes. When Melissa asked who should be doing

this crucial role if not her as the LSC, the ERO did not have an answer and just stood by the statement that she should not.

Many of the educators referenced issues with the education system not meeting the needs of several demographics, including Māori learners. Huia referred to education as being "one of the biggest tools of mass destruction in colonisation"; as an experienced Māori educator, she therefore "holds herself with this awareness of the systemic failures that have consistently underserved and impacted Māori learners."

Huia said that, in an ideal world, given what schools are expected to provide and where they find themselves, each school would come with housing for whānau and staff. This is because, as Huia explained, without a stable, safe, and warm home, the children are already at a disadvantage and "nowhere near the start line" regarding learning. Huia said it was disappointing that she can only really think of that solution as a romantic notion at this point and that it should not be so far-fetched to have access to homes or a home situation as an integral part of a community and of individuals' sense of self-worth and belonging. When Huia considered whether the children's achievement levels would be where they were currently in the ideal scenario she described, she emphatically said "No." As she explained, given the impact of homelessness on children's levels of achievement, the current focus on how to improve academic progress more widely was genuinely misplaced.

When discussing professional learning development, the educators also discussed how much emphasis the education system places on knowledge and professional learning. Huia mentioned that the Kahui Ako paid thousands and tens of thousands of dollars of budget towards practitioners "delivering a kaupapa" about numeracy or literacy. Yet, Huia said, they were also pursuing cultural capital to create localised curricula that served the learners in their schools, which they were prepared to give next to nothing to receive. Huia spoke about how, in their Kahui Ako, the other school leaders and educators and the education system were "some of the first people to stand up and say, 'hey, we don't know the narratives of your whenua. We don't know the narratives of your history.' But then it comes down to 'Can we have it? And can we have it for nothing?'" Huia said there was an expectation that kaumātua and community members, the same community members who were struggling with housing insecurity, would freely give their time, knowledge, and understanding based on their cultural capital. Yet, as Huia pointed out, people outside

of the community who came in with a new way of running a numeracy or literacy programme were given tens of thousands of dollars. She said that this had impacted whanau's perceptions of what was truly valued

When discussing what should be put in place or what was required to address these issues, the educators all agreed that it was essential to focus on building strong relationships with whānau. They suggested that this would help schools and educators provide educational opportunities for the children and also understand where the unmet needs were. However, Rhonda also said there needed to be better connections and relationships with organisations. She believed that being an educator in a special school meant that she probably had more opportunity to build better connections and relationships with organisations regarding access to support and resources than educators in other schools. However, she also thought that it was a significant oversight that they – as a special school – did not qualify to have a funded social worker. Rhonda took this further by expressing her view that she also believed all schools should have social workers because, in her words, "it's the squeaky wheel that gets the whānau what they need."

Marilyn stated that, from her perspective, children who experienced a form of homelessness tended to operate in survival mode and threw up barriers to prevent themselves from getting hurt if the housing they had started to form a connection with was taken out from underneath them. Marilyn believed that, if the education system and society does not address this issue, and if there is no focus on solving homelessness in a meaningful and actionable way, then certain questions can be asked: what happens if the children continue that behaviour into adulthood? How does that impact the way that they have meaningful relationships? How will they know they are not in a good relationship if they do not feel they matter and deserve to feel a sense of belonging? Therefore, Marilyn believed strongly that education can be part of the solution for homelessness, but the government, the Ministry of Education, and society more broadly must recognise that resources need to be put into the housing area more intentionally so that stability and security can occur, after which belonging and ultimately learning can follow. Similarly, Theresa pointed out that the school and individual educators are doing everything they can, but all of this exists within an education system that is not equipping educators with the training, support, and resources they need to be able to deal with the damage that has

impacted and continues to impact children after the housing situations that cause this harm have ended.

Speaking specifically about whānau who have children with learning needs and disabilities, Rhonda said that the impact of homelessness on these whānau has reached a point where the education system must be proactive, including at the ministry level, and must begin to "look at the housing around specialist schools." Rhonda believed it was unacceptable that there were children who needed stability in their routines but were compelled to live in motel rooms for extended periods of time.

4.7.5 Picking Up the Slack from the System — Summary

Many educators shared stories of times that their schools, and they as individuals, stepped in to fill a gap. These educators recognised many of the challenges that their students and whānau had faced (and might face), and they worked to ensure that they could be part of the support that whānau could access in the event of a crisis.

4.8 Education — "We're Still a Kura, the Main Thing Is Still to Deliver Education"

The educators all agreed that the purpose of the education system is to provide quality, meaningful education programmes and opportunities. The learning programmes are intended to focus on the needs of the children in their schools and classrooms, provide learning opportunities that utilise the unique character of the local context, and build this into the curriculum being delivered. This also requires the school to focus on tracking progress and achievement data for every learner in the school community, ensuring they are meeting achievement outcomes, while considering the cultural background, learning needs, and aspirations of their learners and whānau. This section discusses educators' views of student achievement and learner engagement in relation to (i) showing academic progress, (ii) learning progress as a secondary focus, (iii) creating conditions that allow learning to happen, and (iv) showing resistance to engagement with education and educators.

4.8.1 Showing Academic Progress

Schools are required to ensure that children make academic progress. They must report achievement data for every eligible child to the Ministry of Education at the end of

every year. Schools are also audited by the Education Review Office every 1 to 5 years to account for governance of the school and the academic and social–emotional well-being of learners. The educators discussed the challenges of meeting the Ministry of Education's expectations for academic achievement and progression through the curriculum levels, while balancing the work required to understand and meet the diverse needs of children in their classrooms and schools.

Most of the educators acknowledged that, while there is an obligation for educators and schools to report on reading, writing, maths, and other curriculum areas, it is necessary to speak to all the different areas being addressed in schools. Huia explained this point in terms of a predicament that educators had to engage in; they made sure to celebrate with whānau by acknowledging the milestones that their child or children had reached, as opposed to focusing only on where the children had fallen short of benchmarks. At the same time, children were still encouraged to make progress towards attaining the next steps in their learning goals, as all educators agreed that this was the ultimate goal. However, throughout the interviews, the educators consistently expressed that an educator should not sit a child down and tell them that all the effort they had put into their learning, and the progress they had made, were not good enough because of a stated norm that did not take personal circumstances into account.

Many of the educators shared Kelly's concerns that the removal of individualised learning interventions could lead educators to forget that every child is different. As Kelly explained, one-on-one interventions allow educators to build a relationship and understand the child's underlying needs. Kelly said,

> I think there's lots of reasons why students are not achieving at a level that they might otherwise after a year at school. There's a lot of factors and lots of reasons, but I think it is really important that that is recognised, that it is not just that they have a literacy issue. It is actually a way of addressing some of the other issues that have contributed to that [lack of] literacy [achievement]. Reading recovery very much takes the child and works with the child in a way that is tailored to the whole child and the whole picture.

Kelly believed that changing to something that is very prescriptive to address a "literacy issue" would not allow or encourage the person working with small groups of students to make close observations of individual children and make connections to

understand what is going on for that child. Ultimately, Kelly believed that this could potentially mean that children and whānau, who otherwise would have been recognised as requiring extra support or having unmet needs, are going to be missed.

Huia talked about how her school's current statistics of learning progress and achievement in education were at some of the lowest rates she had seen in her 20 years of teaching, especially when compared to the expected benchmark for each year level. She believed that homelessness and housing insecurity were one of the most significant contributors. As she explained, it is difficult for children to focus on learning when they are in a heightened state of emotion because of things happening outside of the school context that nevertheless very much impact what happens inside the school context.

Huia spoke frankly about the school's achievement data being low. For Huia, and her school community, this approach necessarily focused on what success looked like authentically for Māori children and their whānau. She asserted that the ability to balance accelerating progress toward achievement level norms and celebrating any progress made towards individual learning goals ultimately came down to a "recipe of conversations, of listening, of observing, of understanding." She went on to say that she would not necessarily categorise her school as "nailing that recipe" and having it down perfectly. However, she asserted that she and her staff were honest in their reflection and continued in their efforts to get the recipe right.

Marilyn shared the story of a child who came to her school at age 10 and was reading at a 5-year-old level. They were, and had previously been, living in emergency and transitional housing. Marilyn described working hard to build a trusting relationship with the child and his parents. Once the trust had been established and a positive relationship was formed the child began to be able to focus and participate during the classroom programme. He started to engage with his learning and quickly established steady progress in reading and other curriculum areas. Marilyn's key point in sharing this story was that the educator found that, once the child was in that secure place and his learning was happening consistently, he discovered a strength in maths.

> *Eventually, the child scored at Stage 9 in a gloss test assessment, the highest possible score on that assessment format for primary school students. Marilyn and the class educator shared that they were proud of him, and the child asked Marilyn if she could go to his house to tell his parents, to which she agreed. When she arrived, she found that the child had moved all the chairs into the lounge. He*

then called his parents and siblings to come and sit down. Marilyn said she told the parents about their son's maths achievement. They praised him and said, "Good work," and they told him they were proud. Then the whānau looked at Marilyn and said, "What does that mean? Because we don't know." They knew there was something to celebrate and were incredibly proud of their child, but they lacked experience with the school system to understand what Stage 9 in maths meant.

Marilyn spoke fondly about this child and their whānau, and she mentioned that he was now heading towards his late teens. He was working in a stable job. He was happy, was in a positive relationship, and had the solid, stable life that he wanted. This was also what his parents wanted for him. Marilyn's point in sharing this part of the story was that success can be measured in education reporting by the benchmarks established by the Ministry of Education, but this is not the only measure of success. For Marilyn, there was an understanding that, even with this need to report all of the data to the Ministry of Education to account for the learning progress that was being made, it should be recognised that progress and achievement for a child may at times be both adjacent to and not directly in line with how the government guidelines define success and progress. Marilyn's opinion, shared by Huia, was that it should not be up to the education system or the educator to decide a child's goals or potential, and it is essential for the child and their whānau to play an active role in determining what success looks like for them.

4.8.2 Learning Progress as a Secondary Focus

Many of the educators expressed that, even when there was pressure to report achievement data, they considered it was necessary to prioritise helping students develop self-esteem and build learning beliefs. In addition to focusing on well-being, these educators explained that they needed to ensure they understood the strengths and interests of their learners and took the time to prioritise social skills.

Both Huia and Lydia spoke about the impact of homelessness on children who struggle to pick up the behaviours connected to looking after their belongings, because they have had to leave their things behind, often more than once. When discussing this point, Huia stated,

"I frequently hear that 'Māori children don't know how to look after things' and that 'Māori don't know how to look after anything.'" Huia was hearing this

sentiment from people within her school context and from members of communities outside of hers. In response, Huia stated that it was "difficult to know how to look after things when you don't have ownership of anything." She believed that homelessness and housing insecurity help create this misperception because, unlike those privileged enough to have belongings and a home, the children "don't have anything [on which] to base that concept of look after what you have," To address this need, Huia's school was intentionally teaching children how to look after their belongings. Still, Huia pointed out that they had to do this while being sensitive to understanding how the children can take on the learning in the lessons they are teaching when their homelife was in upheaval.

Another point educators shared was that they had to prioritise finding a way to ensure that the children can get to school. Marilyn said that, in her experience, attendance issues often sat alongside housing insecurity. This led to an approach whereby Marilyn's school focused on that aspect first. Several educators reiterated this point and said that, once the children were attending school regularly, educators could work on further relationship–building to enable these children to start feeling safe at school. The educators shared their view that learning and progress toward goals can happen consistently once the children come to school and feel safe.

The educators also asserted that planning and delivering quality learning programmes and opportunities for the learners in their classrooms was a fundamental part of their role. Most of the educators said that establishing a learning environment that promoted the children coming together as a positive learning community was key to the success of the planning and delivery of programmes. Huia, Marilyn, Melissa, Hinemoa, Brooke, and Ken said the establishment of a safe and supportive environment would enable the children in their classes to advance through the learning progressions and the year levels. However, as Huia noted, a school's priority "can't be" focused solely on learning programmes and achievement data. The educators found themselves in a position where they first had to ensure that children's physical and social–emotional needs were prioritised and addressed in order to establish hauora (section 4.3) before they could then begin accelerating the children's progress in their academic achievement.

4.8.3 Creating Conditions That Allow Learning to Happen

A key priority identified by educators was the need to actively create classroom environments that facilitated learning. Most educators shared their understanding that children who have experienced, or are experiencing, significant hardships require extra consideration and thoughtfully applied strategies that promote feelings of safety in order to enable learning to occur. Educators raised several points, including the need to adopt a multifaceted approach that incorporates trauma-informed practice. Several also expressed the opinion that this involves not only the environment and expectations for the children, but also the educator's response to the children, as well as the approach and culture surrounding the adults, including both staff and whānau.

Melissa expressed the view that environment, expectations, and educators' response all needed to be considered, because the school community is "an ecosystem." She elaborated on this by saying it is about "understanding that what is happening needs to be happening for everybody in the school community, so that everybody can feel safe." Melissa talked about how her school's principal had specifically said, "I don't care if I've got everyone from the Ministry of Education and the Prime Minister sitting in my office, if a child needs me or you need me for a child, I will come out … I will be there."

Melissa's perspective was consistency of understanding and approach, not just for the child but for the staff. This includes knowing that everybody has the same kete of behaviour management and pedagogical approach, even if the staff have different strengths. Several educators spoke about the value of having all staff reach into the same kete of strategies, as it helps to ensure a consistent, stable, safe environment. This also models strategies and behaviours that the children can adopt as part of their own emotional regulation and in their interactions with others. To underpin this point, Melissa spoke about a situation where one of the younger children who had developmental delays was highly escalated and was having a very difficult time settling their emotions until another child acted to support them.

> *The child had left their classroom and had gone out onto the school field. They were walking around hitting flags that were being used to lay out an area for an upcoming event. One of the older children in the school, who had previously had a pattern of becoming very emotionally heightened at the school due to experiences of living in emergency housing, saw the child in the field area and recognised the behaviour. Upon seeing the younger student struggling, the older*

child went over and started to walk alongside the child. Melissa recounted that the two children walked around the track laid out by the flags for almost an hour, and she realised the older child, seeing the younger child in distress, had put into action one of the strategies that the staff had used with them when they had previously been in similar situations. This moment illustrated and highlighted for Melissa just how much the environment that is established for these children in school impacts their behaviours and actions, both at the time and moving forward.

This sentiment of the school community working together is echoed in Hinemoa's discussion when she spoke about developing a "culture of care":

> I think we have had to create a culture of care. What does that look like? What does that mean? That means that if we can practice that with each other first [being comfortable having conversations around sensitive topics], and we had to do a lot of work around being respectful with each other because we had patterns in our own behaviour which whānau and children can see — the way we talk to each other, the way we interact — so you can't really help whānau if you're not helping yourself. So, you know there's still work to do around educators knowing that if their culture, or values around a culture of care, [are not] being delivered, then the school values can't really be implemented

Melissa, Marilyn, Huia, and Rhonda raised the impact caused by having difficulty accessing resourcing. Melissa described the resourcing process as "mean" because, in her experience, it was a battle for the school to get people who could come in and provide support for the children who really needed it. Melissa felt that she and her colleagues were "forever trying to get access to funding" to provide learning support assistant (LSA) time. She acknowledged that, although more LSAs were not necessarily the solution, having more caring and supportive trusted adults could help make a difference to children struggling with trauma from insecure housing. Several educators expressed the opinion that, based on their experiences, the government does not seem to understand how much homelessness impacts children and therefore impacts the schools that are trying to support those children. Melissa said that the Ministry would potentially pay attention to explosive behaviours, such as children throwing chairs, and might provide an RTLB or perhaps an educational psychologist. However, as an LSC, she was equally worried about the

children who had internalised behaviours that often came coupled with the "inability to attend to the learning," and she had tried to flag these children to the Ministry of Education. Melissa said that her school was trying to provide play therapy through collaboration with other organisations as one way to resource children who needed support but did not "tick the boxes" that triggered the allocation of resources in the current system. She described this as having her tentacles out into the community all the time to find support that she could draw into the school. The following story describes Melissa's further thoughts about the ERO visit.

> *The people from ERO were witnessing the pastoral care that Melissa, the school leadership team, and the school community believed was essential in order to be attentive to the needs of the whole child. The Education Review Office, on the other hand, said to them that all the focus should be on reading, writing, and maths. The school tried to explain to them, "Hey, we are fully focused on having excellent learning programmes, but we realise that, if a child is sitting there in the classroom hypervigilant, they are not going to be picking up the literacy, they are not going to be picking up their maths, because they cannot attend to the learning that is happening where they are."*

The educators believed that it was essential to understand what was going on when the children with whom they worked exhibited trauma responses. When discussing strategies to help support these children, Melissa and Marilyn both spoke about how their schools strategically moved away from punitive approaches to discipline. Melissa said that, at least once a year over the last 4 years, she and the staff at her school undertook whole-school professional development that focused on understanding the trauma-informed approach. Melissa shared that the school worked with a Māori psychologist who provided coaching on understanding trauma and stress signals that educators might observe in the classroom or during break time. Melissa, Huia, and Marilyn described working with children who, when they arrived at the school from their emergency housing, would be so "escalated" that they would run down the road, throw chairs or food baskets in the classrooms, or try to fight each other. Several educators shared the opinion that it was essential for schools and educators to learn to de-escalate and take the pressure off students rather than applying punitive systems or approaches that could make things more complex and increase the escalation of a child in distress. Huia also mentioned that it was essential to consider "how do we create that safe zone and find time to de-escalate

any of the heightened emotions so that our tamariki are in the best place possible to reconnect with their learning."

Every educator had a story about engaging with the parents of one of the students and seeing how important the child's success at school meant to them. Brooke, a classroom educator, shared an experience she had with a child and their whānau who had recently moved into stable housing after a period of homelessness and living in their car.

> *Brooke quickly realised that the child was not at the expected norms for their age and year level, and she set up a time to meet with their parents. In the meeting, the parents were attentive and engaged in the conversation. When Brooke started asking questions about the home learning tasks that were being sent home, the parents admitted that, due to their own difficulties during their school years, they lacked the confidence to help their child with the tasks. Brooke worked with the whānau to determine the types of at-home learning activities they felt confident with so that she could set tasks they could participate in.*

The educators in schools where home-learning was part of the programme shared that a lack of at-home follow-up was likely to negatively impact the educational attainment and progress the child could make. Multiple educators took the time in their interviews to make clear that, in situations where home learning was not being completed, it was not a sign that the parents did not care about their child or their educational achievement. Rather, they understood that, for parents in insecure or emergency housing, it was more often a matter of time, resources, and space needed to meet school expectations. The educators' opinion was that this then correlated with the educational achievement and progress the child did or did not make towards expected norms for each year level.

Marilyn also said that it was important to know each other and know each other's needs. She believed that more government support programmes addressing homelessness should go towards supporting whānau with children so that they were able to stay in a home and attend a school. Marilyn believed that creating housing stability instead of focusing on temporary solutions or assuming the private rental market would pick up those in emergency housing should be a priority. In her experience, whānau were unable to settle in the private rental market, and ultimately, they cycled back through emergency

housing several times before they found some form of permanent solution that did not involve having their children taken off them.

4.8.4 Resistance to Engaging with Education and Available Support

In the context of this thesis, resistance refers to (i) the fear and anxiety that whānau may display when trying to enrol their child/ren in school and/or communicate their needs; (ii) the anger and frustration that can make whānau reluctant to engage or interact with the school staff or negatively influence the way they react to or view interactions with school staff (or a staff member as an individual); and (iii) the refusal by or reluctance of children to participate in learning programmes or develop friendships or relationships with peers and staff.

4.8.4.1 The Impact of Fear and Anxiety Among Whānau When Enrolling Children or Needing to Communicate Needs

According to Huia, a principal in a mid-sized coastal town, one of the key things that led to what she perceived as resistance in the whānau she interacted with was their expressed frustration with having to "hit absolute rock bottom" before any of the supports kicked in. This was the case with both whānau who were already in the school community and whānau who had been moved into the school community through displacement due to housing insecurity. Several educators, including Huia, mentioned whānau who were without a home, potentially living in their cars and trying to park in the safest places around town each evening, living doubled up and overcrowded in the homes of friends or whānau, or being split up as a whānau among other whānau. The whānau were living with these circumstances while also doing their best to navigate the process and access support from agencies and organisations that would enable them to re-establish safe housing. In Huia's experience, many of the conversations she shared with whānau came after she had to intervene in contentious communications with the school's administration or support staff. Huia described the whānau becoming emotionally elevated and refusing to provide clarifying information or expressing frustration with what was being communicated about the school's processes and being unwilling to follow them. Once Huia intervened and invited the whānau to speak with her in her office, the conversations began with her offering to listen without judgment as the whānau shared what, for them, was the worst of times. Ultimately, Huia's perspective was that the anxiety or frustration the whānau

experienced during these conversations was entirely understandable, and it was essential not to take anything said in those moments personally.

Hinemoa also touched on this point when she spoke about the importance of looking past the delivery to hear the message, especially if the educator had the opportunity for a conversation with whānau who had previously been difficult to contact. She mentioned how she would work with whānau to explain that the school has a zero-tolerance policy for swearing in conversations. She would also stress that it was not the case that the educator/school did not want to listen; rather, staff members were being mindful of the well-being of the educator and also the environment, where children were the primary population. However, this also meant that staff needed to be reminded that they should maintain their professional and personal boundaries for safety reasons, while remaining aware that the language being used was not — usually — directed at them as an individual and was instead a reflection of the person's frustration and the vocabulary they had available to express that frustration.

However, the educators acknowledged that staff communicating with whānau about the appropriate way to share their concerns was dependent on the presence of a positive relationship. Rhonda, a member of senior leadership at a school that caters specifically for the educational needs of children with severe learning, physical, and intellectual disabilities, reiterated this point when she spoke about the distress that parents can feel when they believe they are not being heard or understood by the systems, agencies, and organisations they have sought to engage with to receive support and resources for their children.

4.8.4.2 Frustration and Anger as an Underlying Cause of Reluctance by Whānau to Interact with School Staff

Several educators discussed the reality of parents or caregivers not responding to phone calls or letters home and even not wanting to enter the school grounds. Hinemoa discussed this resistance in the context of generational harm, noting that, in her community, many of the people who were now parents, grandparents, and caregivers were once children who grew up in and were failed by the education system or other government agencies within the same community context they were now raising their children. This resistance acted as a barrier to the development of positive relationships, as it created a situation in which there were minimal opportunities for communication or interaction, which in turn hindered the development of trust between the educator and

whānau and thus limited the support and resources that the educator could offer. The depth of their "generational trauma," to use Hinemoa's term, created what she described as a resistance or reluctance to engage with the school and educators. Hinemoa shared an experience she had with the father of a whānau experiencing housing insecurity, whom she had tried to reach out to multiple times to facilitate support and resources, to no avail.

> I've jumped on the hood of a car of a father I had been trying to get hold of for weeks. He sort of pulled in, and he sort of [hurried the children out of the car] and tried to pull out. And I jumped on his car and I said, "Matua, this is so important. This is how important it is. I have jumped on your car hood, so you stop [because] I want to help you."

In this instance, Hinemoa had developed an understanding of the children's and whānau needs through her trusted relationship with the children, and she had identified suitable support and resources to offer the whānau. However, the lack of a trusted relationship with the parent led her to take extraordinary measures to create an interaction to convince the parent to listen to her so she could discuss how the school could help.

Rhonda shared the story of a Māori whānau (a father and his child) who were living in a motel unit with no cooking facilities, no food storage, and no laundry facilities. As this story provided a comprehensive description of a whānau living in emergency motel housing while navigating school and working with housing organisations and government agencies, it is being shared in its entirety.

> *Rhonda pointed out that this parent was highly focused on ensuring their child had access to the educational opportunities necessary for success and achieving their goals. Yet he reached a point where he felt so defeated by trying to navigate agencies that there were times when he struggled to get out of bed. Rhonda said that the situations surrounding housing insecurity were understandably difficult for the parents. In her experience, this was especially true for dads, as they were often treated as though their expressions of anger and frustration were a problem, even when their feelings were justified. "Actually, when you listen to what the anger is, he's fighting for his [child] … literally fighting for [them]." Rhonda noted that, in reality, attempts to communicate with this parent sometimes led to him raising his voice or punctuating his speech with swear words. She said, "We're asking him to be this polite gentleman who waits, yeah, never, never raises*

their voice. And that is actually such an unreasonable expectation, when you stop and consider that you are dealing with, well, you're working with somebody who is dealing with an enormous range of barriers to what should be such a simple, fundamental, right." Ultimately, Rhonda's opinion was that, if the people who worked with these whānau in organisations or government departments listened to what was being said and recognised what was underpinning the anger and frustration, they would know that the parent was fighting for the survival and well-being of their child. Instead of receiving empathy, in this situation, this whānau said that their interactions with organisations other than the school had led to the father being labelled a "lazy dad with an anger issue." In reality, Rhonda said that this father had completely changed and uprooted his life, doing everything that had been asked of him by the involved agencies. Then, when he was finally in the area where his child's educational needs could be catered for, his concern became, "How can you just leave us like this in a motel room with nothing?"

4.8.4.3 The refusal by or reluctance of children to participate

The participating educators almost universally agreed that the resistance created by what they described as "the trauma" of experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity often manifested as disengagement and/or behavioural issues in the children they worked with. These behaviours impacted the child as an individual, their relationships with others, and their progress towards learning goals and academic achievement.

Resistance was noted in children's behaviours and engagement (or lack thereof) in the school and classroom. Many of the educators spoke of the challenges that classroom educators encounter when trying to welcome into their learning spaces children who were actively experiencing homelessness or had experienced periods of housing insecurity. They spoke of children who were combative with staff and peers; children who remained aloof and withdrawn in and out of the classroom environment; and children who actively avoided attending or left the school during the school day so that they did not have to engage with others or participate in learning programmes. Huia believed that, to a degree, all tamariki who had been impacted by housing insecurity or homelessness had an air of what she described as "perceived resistance" or disengagement. The educators shared that this included disengagement from and resistance to the learning programme, as well as

disengagement from and resistance to establishing connections to others, whether peers or significant adults.

Marilyn discussed her interactions with a student who started at the school at the beginning of their Year 4, having previously never spent longer than a term at any one school. The following is part of one of the stories that Marilyn shared in section 4.2.2.1.

> *As the end of the first term approached, the child, who had remained somewhat separated from the classroom community since the beginning of the year, further disengaged from their peers and classroom programmes, and told their classroom educator that they would not be returning to the school after the holidays. This statement was based on the child's previous experiences, rather than current information, as far as Marilyn knew, because at enrolment, the school had been advised that the child's placement with the whānau member who was their caregiver was permanent. This permanent placement followed several years of being removed from and reunited with their parents, as well as periods of time spent with extended whānau.*

This story underscores the point many of the educators made about the difficulty they faced trying to encourage children to participate in learning programmes, especially when the children had experienced repeated episodes of homelessness. Almost all of the educators expressed the opinion that the reluctance or refusal to engage with educators, peers, or learning programmes was a way for the children to put a protective barrier in place to avoid feeling more upset and hurt if, or when, they would be required to leave the school community due to another loss of housing.

Many educators shared that they took on a supportive role for children and whānau experiencing homelessness outside of their usual classroom and school responsibilities. Whetu said that there were many times that she had to support children and their whānau experiencing homelessness. Whetu's perspective was that some of the children she taught, who had experienced housing insecurity, expressed feelings or displayed behaviours that indicated they were unsure. Overall, however, Whetu found that the children were resilient and could be "quite feisty." Whetu also acknowledged that children experiencing homelessness were more likely than their peers to get angry and surly in the classroom, both with their peers and when asked to participate in learning programmes and activities, a perspective that was shared by several of the educators. The

educators' opinion was that these behaviours could lead to unproductive interactions with their peers, hinder learning experiences, and impede children's achievement of their academic goals. Whetu expressed her opinion that part of this resistance by children in the classroom was because they felt restless having to be in the school environment because they were focused on knowing when they could return home to be with their parents or whānau. Furthermore, her opinion was that, even when the children were placed in a stable housing situation, being away from that home for too long created a sense of restlessness because they had trauma linked to the previous instability, and this made them unsure of whether they could trust the new stability in their housing. Whetu spoke of times where the children she worked with wanted to know when their parents or caregivers were coming to get them, even if they had just been dropped off at school in the morning. Marilyn and Melissa also noted that children could be tearful and at times anxious when being dropped off at school, and they would express their insecurity about who would pick them up and where they would be going home to. Rhonda believed that children's resistance to engagement in the classroom is related to the traumatic response to experiencing homelessness:

> The whānau have been literally picked up and popped into some temporary housing situation, and then everyone walks away, and literally, it implodes for the child, for the parents, and then they come to school and they're really upset and they're distressed, and they no longer want to engage in any sort of learning.

Despite the resistance to engagement with peers and learning that the educators spoke of seeing in their learners, Whetu also noted that a stabilising factor for many children experiencing homelessness or housing insecurity was that they knew school was always there. All of the educators interviewed described schools as being places of routine and consistency; even the staff are, for the most part, consistent, and school is a place where children have to go, even when they are not sure where their home is because they have had that security taken away from them. Some children have had it given to them and taken away from them many times, which the educators said created cycles that perpetuated insecurity for the children and their whānau. Given her experiences with children who had experienced homelessness, Whetu believed the children were not usually resistant or disengaged because they had to be at school or because of the school environment itself; instead, they were insecure because, by being at school, they were

away from their home, and they had a lingering worry based on previous experience that home would not be there when it was time to return.

Resistance, whether in the form of anxiety, frustration, or disengagement, complicates establishing and maintaining positive relationships with children and their whānau. The participating educators believed that educators and school leaders must understand and navigate these situations with compassion and understanding if they hope to alleviate the anxiety and/or frustration of children and whānau, thereby helping them understand their needs and engaging disengaged children in the learning and social opportunities available in the classroom and school. The educators further asserted that a lack of consistency in learning environments, peers, and educators negatively impacted the development of positive relationships. This could manifest as a resistance to engaging with staff on the part of the parents or a resistance to engaging with educators, peers, and learning programmes on the part of the child.

4.8.5 Education — Summary

The educators all understood that their primary role, as outlined in their job description, was to plan and teach lessons and activities that supported learners in making progress towards their learning goals, while also promoting the social and emotional well-being of their learners. However, most of the educators expressed the opinion that progress towards, and achievement of, learning outcomes was extremely difficult if not impossible for learners who had experienced homelessness. The key points raised by the educators were that the education system they worked within undermined the work that educators were doing to meet physical survival needs and provide emotional care to learners and their whānau who presented with symptoms of trauma. By necessity, the educators prioritised the establishment of hauora. By doing this, they explained, they could then work on intentionally creating environments tailored to understand and address the trauma responses of students in their classrooms. The educators asserted that, once these aspects were in place, along with the appropriate secondary supports, they could (and, they believed, would) begin to focus on accelerating academic achievement to improve achievement data.

4.9 Findings Conclusion

Throughout the interviews, the participating educators consistently referred to the importance and value of establishing positive, trusted, relationships with children and whānau. The educators' stories revealed not only the positive aspects of establishing these relationships but also the educators' experiences of what an absence of positive relationships can lead to for children and whānau. Improved communication and active collaboration paves the way for tamariki and whānau dealing with homelessness to experience less stigma, feel supported and empowered, and be able to participate in all aspects of the community. The educators understood that, for tamariki, a stable, consistent, and supportive education experience creates the opportunity to feel a sense of belonging in their place, feel strong in their identity, and be proud of who they are. Several educators shared that positive collaboration developed an understanding of the community's needs and clarified how local opportunities, organisations, and programmes might meet those needs. Additionally, the educators believed that schools, agencies, and organisations should work more collaboratively within a purposeful framework rather than operating as a series of silos acting independently. This was highlighted by a few of the educators as a critical step towards creating genuine wraparound support for the children and their whānau experiencing homelessness.

5 Chapter 5

Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter begins by summarising and discussing the study's findings in the context of the existing literature, while highlighting key areas of new knowledge. Next, the limitations of the research are identified. These are followed by recommendations for policy, for educators' professional development, and for others who work with children and whānau experiencing homelessness in Aotearoa, as well as implications for future research. The chapter concludes with a review of the understandings, beliefs, and aspirations I gained from completing this research.

5.1.1 Answering the research questions

This section discusses findings in relation to the research questions as first presented in Section 1.3.1:

1. What are educators' experiences of supporting and working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness?
2. Who and what are educators interacting with in their work to support children and whānau impacted by homelessness?

The discussion for question 1 is in Section 5.2, followed by the answer to question 2 in Section 5.3.

5.2 Educators' Experiences of Supporting and Working with Children and Whānau Experiencing Homelessness

This section frames the discussion of educators' perspectives using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST) as first introduced in Section 3.7.2.1. The customised model, the Educator Ecological Systems model, is re-presented here and is used to structure the discussion, which centres on educators and begins with their lived experiences and views. The model has six components beginning with the central focus on educators: (i) the impact of educators' personal lived experience on their interactions with children and whānau; (ii) educators prioritising a physical and social-

emotional well-being (hauora) safety net; (iii) the role of stability and consistency of people and place as part of positive child–educator–whānau relationships; (iv) the creation of a culture of belonging and care in school environments; (v) the nature of communication pathways and their impacts; and (vi) the expansive support role educators play beyond the bounds of the school environment.

Figure 6 *Educator Ecological Systems*

The following sections discuss the various layers and influences represented in this model, beginning with the educators' lived experiences. Of note, in the Aotearoa context, the Ministry of Education (2024b) has a principle of "Community Engagement" that locates the child within their whānau and wider community contexts. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education places strong emphasis on educator–whānau partnerships in support of children's learning. As a result, the relationships with tamariki and the relationships with whānau are often reported as being inextricably entwined. This is reflected throughout the discussion.

5.2.1 The Impact of an Educator’s Personal Lived Experience

The scope and nature of an educator’s lived experience and the influence it has on their practice and interactions are essential contributions of this research. They span educators’ shared cultural heritage, shared lived experience of childhood adversity, and the need for them to be open to learning about and understanding the experiences they do not share with the children they are teaching. This section of the discussion is located within the central circle of the Educator Ecological Systems model.

Several participants in this research shared that their childhood and life experiences and/or cultural identity influenced their ability to form connections and guided their interactions with children and whānau (Kwaah et al., 2024; Lee & Schallert, 2016; Schwartz & Konchiki, 2024). Depending on their life experience and/or cultural identity, an educator may find that their strengths and capabilities can be utilised to support the children and whānau within their school community (Peddle, 2020; Rahsheed et al., 2020; Schwartz & Konchiki, 2024). In this research, two educators shared that being Māori sometimes enabled them to establish positive communication pathways and learning environments with Māori children and whānau. They found that this cultural connection helped them build relationships more quickly than non-Māori educators or educators whose outward appearance does not signal their Māori heritage could (see Section 4.6.1). This supports findings from international studies that suggest cultural and ethnic commonalities among educators, children, and whānau in the school environment can enhance engagement in educational spaces (Driessen, 2015; Rahsheed et al., 2020).

Findings highlight the role that an educator's lived experience of childhood adversity can play in their work with children and whānau experiencing homelessness (Section 4.6.2). Educators in this study with lived experience of childhood adversity considered their experiences a positive factor in their ability to build relationships and establish trust with children effectively; this echoes findings from Peddle’s (2020) research with educators in the USA.

In this research, the participating educators extended the influence that their adverse childhood experiences (ACE) could have on their practice into an advantage when building and maintaining relationships with whānau. They found that sharing their own experience of adversity sometimes helped counter any semblance of judgment or the perpetuation of stigma or stereotypes that might hinder the creation of pathways to identify and meet the needs of children and whānau. There was potential for positive

connections over shared experiences, regardless of whether the childhood adversity was the same one a child or whānau was currently experiencing (e.g., homelessness) or within a shared range (e.g., poverty or domestic violence; Peddle, 2020). Put another way, such shared experiences were seen by educators as advantageous for quickly and successfully working with and understanding the needs of children and their whānau in order to provide them with adequate support.

Educators were emphatic that those with a lived experience of childhood adversity do not have to disclose their experiences or even acknowledge that they share a common experience. Whetu made the point that personal choice is essential when it comes to educators' disclosure of their personal experiences (Section 4.6.2) asserting that "It's up to the individual as well." The teachers in Peddle's (2020) study made a similar point and offered similar reasons for their active disclosing of experiences. Furthermore, the educators in that research also commented on the importance of each educator deciding how much sharing they are willing to engage in when drawing on their ACEs to connect with their students (Peddle, 2020). This finding contrasts with the work of Hubel et al. (2020) and Rancher and Moreland (2023), who found that educators with ACEs working in ECE environments in the USA were more likely to create less optimal teacher–child environments.

On the other hand, several educators in the current study identified the importance of understanding and acknowledging the children's lived experiences they did not share (Section 4.6.3). Huia mentioned that, if educators are always looking only for the experiences they do have in common, they may not identify or understand children's actual lived experiences (Section 4.6.3). An essential aspect of the findings on lived experience is the importance of being open to understanding where experiences differ. This echoes Hansen's (1999) findings on the importance of an educator's ongoing effort to understand the differences and commonalities between themselves and students. Educators shared that they and their colleagues could work towards identifying and understanding the lived experiences that different educators do not share with the children currently in the school community and how they can bridge that gap.

Esaki and Larkin's study (2013) on the ACEs of professionals working with children who had experienced trauma noted the impact of this work on the professionals. These professionals included educators working to provide schooling in the agency where the study was undertaken. Professionals' increased risk of experiencing secondary

traumatic stress, vicarious stress, and compassion fatigue when they had their own history of ACEs was specifically noted (Esaki & Larkin, 2013). Notably, this research did not mention personal stress, even from the participants who shared they had ACEs in their own lives. All participants in this current study shared stories about the adversity and trauma that had affected the children and whānau they had worked with. Often, during their sharing, they mentioned observing trauma behaviours among their students (Section 4.3.4); for example, Marilyn described one child who "would cry a lot, get really scared of anything new." As mentioned earlier, the choice to disclose personal experiences with adversity was asserted by Whetu to be up to the individual (section 4.6.2). She went on to say, "They might not have it within them. They might be traumatised so much that they haven't got the strength [to disclose their experiences]." However, despite this general acknowledgment of potential impacts, Whetu did not refer to feeling traumatised or emotionally drained in her own practice. Her statement that it should be up to the individual to decide whether and how to disclose past experiences, as this disclosure may be challenging for them at a personal level, aligns with findings from research into the influence of educators' ACEs on their teaching practice (Peddle, 2020).

There is limited research on educators' personal ACEs and how these relate to their practice and interactions with learners facing homelessness or others traumatic events. However, this research has initiated a more expansive exploration of the complex role of an educator's lived experience.

5.2.2 Educators Prioritising a Social–Emotional and Physical Well-Being Safety Net

The need for educators to prioritise creating a safety net for child and whānau social–emotional and physical well-being (hauora) in the learning space and school community is a contribution of this research. This section begins with a discussion of the provision of resources — such as food, clothing, and access to personal hygiene products and facilities — and the facilitation of healthcare access. I then move on to explore social–emotional well-being, including encouraging connection to cultural heritage and providing spaces and opportunities for children to participate in social activities and clubs to support social engagement and connection. Finally, this section discusses the finding that participating educators placed great importance on recognising trauma responses in school environments, as well as on intentionally modelling and teaching emotional regulation strategies to help children name and manage their feelings. As the creation of

a physical and social-emotional safety net involves the children and their whānau, this section of the discussion spans the second and third layers of the Educator Ecological Systems model.

For participating educators and the schools, they worked in, an essential component of their work with children and whānau experiencing homelessness was ensuring learners' physical needs were being met (Section 4.3.2). The first step the participants described in this process was identifying which physical needs, if any, were unmet. Once they had this information, the next step was to determine whether the school could provide resources to meet those needs. One of the most common physical needs that schools provide is food, and this research found that the provision of food is not limited to the children currently enrolled at the school. As Hinemoa said, "We will do kai packs for our large whānau at the end of the year or end of the term." This echoes Kitching's (2019) findings from her research on implementing holistic well-being structures in schools with high numbers of students from low socio-economic backgrounds in South Africa. She found that providing meals was an essential step towards improving students' overall well-being and academic progress. Furthermore, the educators in this current study identified that, in addition to food, providing clothing, such as a uniform, or personal hygiene products, such as sanitary pads or shampoo, can support well-being and mitigate some of the barriers to attendance (Section 4.3.2). This aligns with the finding from Reed-Victor and Stronge (1997) that schools' provision of resources can play a role in developing resilience. When commenting on the physical aspect of hauora, many of the participants in this study emphasised the importance of understanding the specific needs of the student as an individual so that support was timely and relevant, which echoes findings from Ukoha's (2021) research in the USA on educators' perspectives regarding the role of schools when working with elementary children experiencing homelessness. This also aligns with Scanlon and McKenna (2018) who found that a significant barrier to school attendance was unmet needs, such as sleep and insufficient access to food.

The role that schools can play in facilitating access to healthcare for children and whānau is a key finding of this research. Several participating educators shared experiences of taking children to medical appointments, liaising with public health staff to organise health checks for pre-school children in whānau, and providing space for health professionals to hold clinics that provided immunisations and prescriptions

(Section 4.3.2). This research highlights the facilitation of access to healthcare is a core component of establishing hauora, as it enables quicker diagnosis of health concerns, provides avenues for treatment, and can therefore improve attendance and engagement in the school environment. These findings mirror those of Kitching (2019) regarding the important role of proactive attention to health education and access in establishing holistic wellbeing. Reed-Victor and Stronge (1997) also found that, when a school takes on the role of supporting access to health care, students' overall well-being and academic achievement can improve. An important finding from this current study was the wide range of ways schools and educators are working alongside healthcare professionals, well beyond the delivery of curriculum (e.g., puberty education), to bring medical clinics, access to diagnosis and treatment, and preventive medicine into school spaces. This provides a pathway to seeking and receiving healthcare by combining the school's familiar environment with the expertise and resources of health professionals.

This research found that educators believed an essential component of helping children and whānau establish hauora was supporting or reestablishing an ongoing connection to their cultural heritage. This was discussed in terms of developing and applying culturally responsive pedagogy, as well as encouraging children to participate in culturally significant events and activities (Section 4.3.3.1). While the participants spoke about the need to be culturally responsive and to apply practices that view and encourage students to see their culture and heritage as a strength and a form of connection, this aspect was specifically mentioned for Māori children and whānau. This is likely due to Māori being the Indigenous people of Aotearoa, who are over-represented in the homeless population (Statistics NZ, 2024). Māori have also been historically underserved by the Aotearoa education system, and this has led to ongoing research on best practices to support Māori learners and the creation of resources aimed at improving cultural responsiveness, as well as pedagogical documents to support and guide teacher practice (Ministry of Education, 2024b). The importance of learners bringing their cultural heritage into their learning spaces aligns with the work of González and Moll (2002), and this cultural knowledge being respected as part of their identity contributes to hauora by addressing Taha Whānau (social wellbeing; Durie, 1994).

This research (Section 4.3.3.2) found that providing spaces and opportunities for children to engage and connect in social activities and clubs is a protective factor. Many participants shared experiences in which the creation of a school club around a social

activity or sports team provided a pathway for children's connection with peers and significant adults within the school. This finding aligns with the principle that feeling personally included (Goodenow, 1993) helps establish a sense of belonging (an aspect of social well-being). A finding of the current research is that participation in these social activities enabled children experiencing homelessness to develop positive peer relationships and build trusted relationships with educators, while also receiving access to resources (such as food, showers, and clean clothes) without feeling singled out as being in need of extra support. This can be connected to the assertion by Kirkman et al. (2010) that experiencing homelessness can, to the overall detriment of a child, impact opportunities to engage in extracurricular activities. The participants in this research built extracurricular and social opportunities around children's school attendance, and they worked to ensure that children experiencing homelessness had access to sports, clubs, and social connections.

Another finding in this research was the importance of educators recognising trauma responses in school environments and intentionally modelling and teaching emotional regulation strategies to help children name and manage their feelings and improve mental-emotional well-being (Section 4.3.4). Children who entered the school or class environment during or after experiencing homelessness were observed by the educators to display trauma responses in the form of explosive outbursts, extreme anxiety, and/or quiet withdrawal. Several educators described the benefits they have received in their practice and school environment by working with experts to identify trauma responses and understand the ways to support the children displaying trauma-related behaviours. As seen in research in other countries and affirmed in this study, educators and educational environments must send children signals of safety and employ a trauma-informed approach to understand what they observe in the children (Cramer, 2018; Department for Education, 2022; Frearson & Duncan, 2024). The new contribution from these findings is that, once educators have identified children and whānau, they often need to make judgment calls on the best course of action. During this decision-making, the educators tried to ensure that the support being offered or provided did not override the mana and agency of the whānau. In the participating educators' experiences, adopting an approach that tended to the children's emotional needs meant schools were more likely to see a positive shift in students' behaviours, whether they were currently experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness or had recently been moved into stable housing.

Establishing a safety net of support that is focused on establishing hauora is an integral part of the role educators take on when supporting children and whānau experiencing homelessness. A fundamental aspect of this research was participants' understanding that children are more likely to struggle to regulate their emotions, engage with learning programmes, or make academic progress if there is no active, purposeful work to achieve hauora amid the stress of homelessness.

5.2.3 Relationships and the Importance of Stability and Consistency

The importance of positive, trusted relationships between the educator and the child, and between the educator and the whānau, was a consistent point raised by participants in this research. This research explored the nuances of how positive relationships can be effective in providing or facilitating access to resources and support, the influence they can have on creating stability, and the impact of relationship consistency on engagement in educational spaces. This section is located within the second and third layers of the Educator Ecological Systems model.

This research found that a positive relationship with an educator can be a protective factor for children experiencing housing insecurity as it enables educators to communicate with children and identify potential unmet needs. This echoes findings from Koslouski and Stark's (2021) study on promoting learning for children who have experienced trauma, in which educators "prioritized relationships" (p. 447) as an effective initial step towards improving engagement and learning. The establishment of positive relationships is understood to be crucial for creating effective teaching and learning programmes because they provide a foundation and a sense of safety that support interaction in the learning space (Burdick & Corr, 2024). As in other countries, schools in Aotearoa are often a consistent and stable environment in which positive educator–child relationships can be developed, and strong relationship-building skills have been identified as having the potential to positively impact the child and their learning progress (Bishop & Rigney, 2023). Educators in this current study also recognised this potential, with findings illustrating that they viewed the development of trusted relationships as a priority and fundamental to their opportunities to support children in their learning, as well as to the well-being of children and whānau (Section 4.2.1). Having a positive, trusted, relationship with children was also recognised as opening communication channels so the school became aware of a child's homelessness (4.2.2.1). This echoes findings from Thielking et al. (2017), who asserted that the establishment of relationships

between educators and learners could provide a pathway for the disclosure of homelessness.

Educator findings also indicated that children experiencing homelessness tend to display disruptive and emotionally dysregulated behaviours that have a negative impact on their interactions in the classroom (Section 4.3.4). These behaviours, combined with long periods of inconsistent attendance, often result in educators perceiving children's unwillingness to engage in the learning programmes (Section 4.8.3.4). This aligns with studies on the impact of homelessness on educational engagement and achievement, which identified higher incidences of disruptive classroom behaviour in children who experienced homelessness (O'Leary, 2001). Sandstrom and Huerta (2013) found that "children experiencing residential insecurity demonstrate worse academic and social outcomes, such as … problem behaviors" than children with stable housing (p. 28).

5.2.3.1 Consistency of Place as an Influence on Developing Positive Relationships

Educators highlighted that the consistency of the school environment affects how schools and educators can support children and whānau. The findings suggest that attending the same school consistently can act as a protective factor for children by providing them with a safe and stable environment (Section 4.2.2.1). This is in line with guiding federal policy from the USA (National Center for Homeless Education, 2018), which identifies the "right to remain at the school of origin" and the "right to receive transportation to and from the school of origin" (para. 2) as essential components to improving academic engagement and achievement. This also echoes findings from Howland et al. (2017), who described the importance of a "stable and supportive classroom culture" (p. 276) in enabling children experiencing homelessness to thrive at school.

5.2.3.2 Primary Contact Person

Educators considered having a consistent contact or support person within the school environment to be one of the ways schools could ensure the consistency and stability of relationships. Many thought the designation of a staff member as the primary contact for a child or their whānau, especially when they joined a school due to homelessness, was valuable in helping children and whānau settle in (Section 4.2.1). Though their study focused on inclusive education practices for children with learning

needs, Shevchenko et al. (2020) discussed the positive impact of trusted, ongoing contact with an educator on engagement and communication for children and whānau. In addition, if whānau began to experience homelessness while enrolled in a school, having a primary contact person was thought to be beneficial for both the child and their whānau. This is because the primary contact person was already known and trusted, and they provided a discreet pathway to the support whānau needed. The use of a primary contact person, as discussed by participants in this research, echoes perspectives from school leaders in Pavlakis's (2018b) research on working with whānau experiencing homelessness, specifically regarding communication and interaction. This adds to understandings about the positive impact that education spaces and educators can have when they take a proactive role in providing information and facilitating access to support and resources (Mutch & Collins, 2012; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002; Ukoha, 2021).

The findings indicate that school-designated primary contact persons for children and whānau were able to create systems that identified whānau in need or at risk and streamlined access to support for children and whānau. Examples of these systems included hiring a community member to put a familiar face on communication engagement, building relationships with local iwi and organisations, and having LSCs proactively visit whānau in emergency or transitional housing (Section 4.2.1). The primary contact person could also pass on timely and relevant information to classroom educators, thus helping maintain continuity of care and support across the classroom and the wider school environment. When they did not have to serve as the primary contact between the child and whānau and the wider support system, the classroom-based educators in this research reported that, while they still focused on building positive relationships, they could also seek to establish a supportive environment for a child's social interactions and learning programmes (Section 4.8.3). This point aligns with several other studies that have identified the need to build relationships and create positive learning spaces in order to provide learning opportunities that a child can confidently engage with (Bishop & Rigney, 2023; Mutch & Collins, 2012; Skinner, 2024; Swick, 1996; Swick & Bailey, 2004).

Educators in the current study almost unanimously agreed that a human connection factor was involved in the primary contact person's efficacy, meaning that who was the "right" consistent primary contact depended on the child and whānau feeling understood and supported by that person (Section 4.2.2.3). I was unable to locate research

that specifically addressed the identification of qualities or factors necessary for a person to successfully serve as a primary contact for support in education spaces. When a designated primary contact was present in a school, those interviewed for this research often considered that each educator within their school remained available to provide support to children and whānau, on their own or alongside the designated primary contact.

The availability of all educators and adults within an educational site to take on a primary contact role was identified in this research as essential for creating a school environment that fosters trust and understanding among educators, children, and whānau. This finding provides new insight into how homeless children and whānau might be supported, as it identifies that any educator in a school (e.g., a classroom teacher, a deputy principal, or a school librarian) could be called upon and productively take on the role of primary contact person (Section 4.2.2.3) This contrasts with the literature I was able to locate that discusses the role of social workers in schools as possible support persons for children and whānau experiencing some form of adversity (Allen-Meares et al., 2013; Beddoe, 2019; Beddoe et al., 2018; Lee, 2012; Sherman, 2016; Singstad et al., 2024; To, 2009).

5.2.4 Creating a Culture of Care and Belonging

According to the participants, creating a culture of care and belonging involves intentional interactions with children and whānau, positive collaboration among educator colleagues, and a supportive school environment. These aspects are located across the second, third, and fourth layers of the Educator Ecological Systems model.

This study found that many educators and their participating schools implement trauma-informed practices to prioritise and support trusted relationships (Section 4.8.3). This echoes findings from international research regarding the use of trauma-informed pedagogy when working with children experiencing homelessness (Cramer, 2018; Fisher et al., 2019). However, in this current study, educators reported that their use of trauma-informed pedagogy aimed to create a purposeful whānau-based environment in which the school is a place where children and whānau feel accepted and respected. This approach involved ensuring that the key message to learners was that they belonged in the school and community as the individuals they were (Section 4.3.3.1). Many participants recognised that the use of culturally responsive and trauma-informed pedagogy played a crucial role in establishing a school environment that fostered trusted relationships between children and educators. This finding reflects Murphey and Sacks's (2019)

research in the American context. Furthermore, given the over-representation of Māori children and whānau in homelessness statistics (Statistics NZ, 2024), it has been identified that it is important to create a framework that is "culturally aligned" and "empowered by Māori world views" (Lawson-Te Aho et al., 2019, p. 1). The findings of the current study convey a strong message from several educators that, by employing trauma-informed pedagogy to foster positive, trusting relationships with children, educators can consistently express ongoing affirmation and positive beliefs in the child (Section 4.8.3). The research highlighted that this positive relationship and educators' expressed affirmations can, in some Aotearoa educational contexts, foster children's self-esteem. This can be linked to Arnold and Fisch's (2011) study, which indicated that a lack of a positive relationship can contribute to low self-esteem in children. The educators in this current study held that positive beliefs encouraged in the child by their trusted educator and reinforced through verbal communication and non-verbal interactions within the school environment can help the child overcome feelings of disillusionment and low self-worth. This is a relevant counterpoint to findings from research into the impact of homelessness on children and their education, which have indicated that children develop negative self-esteem when comparing themselves to their peers and that there is a higher likelihood that children experiencing homelessness will view the errors that accompany the learning process as personal failures and a lack of ability (Dudovitz & Chung, 2019).

A finding of this research is that the participants highlighted the importance of fostering environments where positive relationships among all stakeholders, including educators, children, and whānau, are prioritised, as this is vital to creating a culture of care and belonging. This indicates that the development of positive educator–child relationships is a fundamental component of establishing supportive and effective learning environments and promoting academic progress (see sections 4.2 and 4.8.3). This aligns with Sheldon's (2011) assertion that, in order to teach homeless children, schools must create an environment where all children feel that they are cared for and that the school and people within it are safe.

This research further reinforces the importance of developing a structure for positive peer interactions in the school environment, which echoes Imad's (2022) findings about the role of a positive peer network and social interactions in enhancing a child's confidence and self-esteem. The findings from the current study highlighted the

importance of a school-wide approach to relationship building and behaviour management, which could be consistently implemented by all educators and adults in the educational environment. Educators discussed the positive impact of a consistent and predictable interaction format on children, whānau, and educators (Section 4.2.2). This was noted by most of the participating educators as necessary to their school's successful work with children and whānau experiencing homelessness.

5.2.5 Role and Impact of Community Belongingness

This section discusses the research findings relating to educators' perspectives on the impact of belongingness. The study highlighted that experiencing homelessness while living in a community with existing connections could have a detrimental impact on maintaining a sense of belongingness. However, possible detrimental impacts on belongingness were also noted when whānau were moved into a community where they had no existing connections. As belongingness encompasses both the school environment and the broader community and organisations, this aspect of the findings is located across the fourth and fifth layers of the Educator Ecological Systems model.

Findings suggested that when whānau move to a home in a close-knit, stable community with a somewhat fixed population, they could potentially find it difficult to develop a sense of belonging there. In these situations, the strong connections and sense of belonging that already exist within the community could impede children and whānau who have moved into this community from forming connections and establishing belongingness. This is in line with findings from Kirkman et al.'s (2010) Australian study, which described children who were experiencing homelessness as feeling "disconnected from the community because they move too frequently to know the neighbourhood and to feel they belong" (p. 999). Furthermore, participants in this research identified that children who are known to be living in emergency housing or away from their immediate whānau may experience social stigma from some people in the school community, and this can also act as a barrier to belongingness. This echoes Watts et al.'s (2006) study of the experiences of young people within the foster system. The study participants described their efforts to establish connections and feel a sense of belonging despite multiple moves and placements while they were in the care of the Child, Youth, and Family (now Oranga Tamariki) system in Aotearoa. They also disclosed the difficulties they experienced trying to make friends and establish connections when their living situation was not secure and their status as foster children was known by others. They

spoke of the stigma and shame they felt with each transition into a new community and school, as well as the barrier to connection and belonging that they felt came with it (Watts et al., 2006).

Contrastingly, several educators in the current study spoke about the protective aspect of children and their whānau remaining within the community to which they are connected, even when experiencing housing insecurity. The educators shared several examples of how this connection and belonging could be protective, including whānau social networks stepping in to find alternative accommodation so the whānau impacted by homelessness did not have to leave the area. This aligns with Goodman (1991), who found that whānau with positive social networks were less likely to enter homelessness or experience a prolonged duration of homelessness.

This research identified that one benefit of whānau remaining within the community when they were entering a period of homelessness, was that the child/ren stayed connected to their peer networks and trusted adults within their school environment. This has been recognised in international studies as a positive influence on maintaining a sense of belonging (Miller et al., 2014; Moore, 2013; Sheldon, 2011).

The participants in this study also suggested that a strong cultural connection for children and whānau could create a broader safety net for whānau facing a potential housing crisis, which would enable issues to be addressed before they became homeless. This included school communities where a shared faith allowed the child and their whānau to maintain connections to the school community through involvement in non-school events, such as community groups and faith-based gatherings, even when they were unable to attend school regularly for a period (Sections 4.3.3.1 and 4.3.3.2). This aligns with Kilmer et al. (2012), who identified ongoing social connections across communities, as well as interactions with specific interventions or faith groups (e.g., church groups), as positive ways to facilitate ongoing connections and a sense of belonging for whānau and children experiencing homelessness.

A key finding of this research was educators' perception of the potentially negative impact of intentionally facilitating a sense of belonging quickly for children who then had to move out of the school. Several educators described establishing processes that are usually successful in welcoming and supporting children and whānau. These included providing resources to help with school attendance and implementing programmes that fostered a sense of belonging in the child. But educators suggested that

this could be detrimental if the child and whānau were still experiencing homelessness, and they were required to change schools again due to another move. The findings indicated that these school changes can also contribute to children's resistance to engaging in their next learning space as a self-protective barrier against further hurt (Section 4.8.4.3). This aligns with Hallett's (2011) research with youth experiencing homelessness, in which it was found that the stress of having to change school environments frequently could lead to a sense of hurt, shame, and reluctance to engage in the next educational environment. The loss of their school community can add another layer of trauma to an already traumatised child (Hallett, 2011; Parrott et al., 2022; Wright-Howie, 2009).

5.2.6 The Scope and Impact of Consequential Communication Pathways

Given the scope of demands involved in supporting children and whānau, effective communication requires several stakeholders to each play a role in the timely sharing of relevant information (Shephard et al., 2021). The expansive nature of communication systems described during educators' interviews means the findings span the second, third, fourth, and fifth layers of the Educator Ecological Systems model. Educators identified the need for timely and clear communication between educators and children, educators and whānau, educators and local community organisations, and educators and educational sites by identifying issues arising from gaps in communication. Thus, this research reiterates that, when a school serves as a nexus for the community, it can act as a positive conduit for communication and information about support (Mutch & Collins, 2012; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002; Ukoha, 2021).

One of the consequential communication gaps identified by participants was between classroom educators and school leaders serving as primary contacts for children and whānau (section 4.3.3). In one instance, the lack of communication about a child's circumstances caused embarrassment for the child and the educator, and the child felt unable to participate in a learning task. Another gap occurred when a child had been told not to let anyone know about the difficulties their whānau was facing due to fear of stigma and of the system and structures in Aotearoa society (Section 4.4.2). Fear of social stigma and feelings of shame was also identified as a reason for whānau to feel reluctant to inform schools about their homelessness (Scanlon & McKenna, 2018). This issue was also identified in research undertaken by Shields and Warke (2010), who found that a "fear of negativity, marginalization, or exclusion" can lead whānau "to attempt to hide their

homeless status" (p. 809). Educators in the current study discussed a similarly focused gap between educators and whānau, when educators' efforts to understand a child's needs were misinterpreted as an attempt to interfere with their whānau structure rather than to provide support.

The findings also pinpointed a communication gap between schools and housing organisations, with participants reporting communication between housing organisations, support agencies, and schools was often almost non-existent. The educators noted this could negatively impact children and whānau. On the other hand, Pavlakis's (2018a) US-based study found that the proactive interaction between schools and organisations providing housing for homeless whānau helped overcome barriers to educational engagement. Thielking et al. (2017) also identified that improved communication between educators and support agencies could positively impact students experiencing homelessness.

The findings also highlight the impacts of communication between schools regarding homeless students, as this was often disorganised and unstructured (Section 4.4.3). As a result, it was not always possible for children and whānau experiencing homelessness to receive continuity of support as they transitioned between schools. It is noteworthy that some schools were utilising the Kahui Ako structure to create communication pathways and establish ways of engaging and supporting children and whānau that were predictable and like those they would have had if they had stayed at their previous school. Two educators identified a consistent system that enabled predictable interactions between schools as a protective factor for children and whānau. This finding aligns with Miller's (2011c) research into access to educational networks, in which he recommends that schools, community organisations, and housing providers "construct systems of collaborative understanding and practice" (p. 544).

5.2.7 Support Beyond the Bounds of the Immediate School Environment

The findings showed that educators recognised that supporting homeless children and whānau was complex and multifaceted and that it involved activities that extended beyond the classroom and school environment. For instance, they provided resources or spaces to meet physical needs such as food, clothing, hygiene products, and, in some cases, a night of housing, as discussed in Section 4.7.2. Hence, findings relevant to this point span layers two to six of the Educator Ecological Systems model.

As others have found, this research reiterates that schools with a consistent and safe environment can serve as a nexus for the community (Mutch & Collins, 2012). Through collaborations with community organisations and support networks (Sections 4.4.3 and 4.7.3), they can act as a positive conduit for communicating needs and for receiving information and support (Mutch & Collins, 2012; Reed-Victor & Stronge, 2002; Ukoha, 2021).

These finding are elaborated in response to Research Question 2 below.

5.3 Educators' interactions with the system and support organisations

This section addresses Research Question 2:

Who and what are educators interacting with in their work to support children and whānau impacted by homelessness?

This section is located primarily in the sixth layer of the Educator Ecological Systems model, with some overlap with the fifth layer.

The study findings indicate that educators interact with and build relationships with agencies and organisations who have some responsibility or role in addressing certain challenges faced by children and whānau experiencing homelessness. All the participating educators, directly or indirectly, shared that they and their schools were doing everything they could to mitigate the harm caused by failures across multiple systems (Section 4.7). The work educators did to address and heal the harm caused by limitations/failures in systems that have directly involved or impacted a child was identified as a necessary part of their role in the school. The importance of educators building relationships and interacting with support agencies and systems is identified in international studies that focus on how to best support children and whānau when they face adversity or experiencing trauma (Rudling et al., 2023; Vaivada et al., 2022). The types of support included the understanding that basic needs — including safe, stable, and healthy housing — must be met before learning can happen (Rudling et al., 2023), as well as the positive impact of schools and health care systems working together to increase physical and mental health and well-being (Vaivada et al., 2022).

As noted in Section 5.2.5, a lack of clear communication between the different support agencies and organisations increased the demands on educators' time and energy. Pehi et al. (2025) noted that inconsistent data collected by housing agencies complicates

communication about children in the housing system and their needs. In the current study, educators viewed this dynamic as creating situations where whānau were not aware of what other support they could access, and/or the school or educator was not aware that whānau had already tried to engage with some of the agencies or organisations they were recommending.

5.3.1 The Ministry of Education

A common sentiment among the participant educators was that they did not feel they were being listened to by people in the Ministry of Education (4.7.4); moreover, the complex circumstances they were supporting whānau and children to manage were not acknowledged in any education policy. In contrast, in the USA, there is a federal policy and established guidelines to create a uniform approach for supporting children experiencing homelessness while attending school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2025).

Overwhelmingly, the lack of targeted, practical resources and guidelines to equip educators to successfully work with and support homeless children and their whānau was identified as a core issue (Section 4.7.4). Furthermore, several educators mentioned that education to help them understand the impact of homelessness would be beneficial. This insight aligns with the experiences and perceptions of early childhood educators who participated in a study that measured their understanding and ability to work with children experiencing homelessness before and after targeted professional development (Wright et al., 2019). A lack of professional learning focused on understanding and addressing homelessness was said by participants in this research to lead to inconsistent approaches to the same problems across schools and among individual educators.

Inconsistencies that can lead to inequity were also noted in relation to the lack of guidelines/provision of support. This aligns with Scanlon and McKenna (2018) who found that there was a lack of uniformity in the processes schools were using when working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness. One example given in this research was that if a school did not have a social worker in school (SWiS), an educator often worked as a de facto social worker (Section 4.7.3). This could involve supporting whānau to apply for extra support in areas unrelated to the child's educational needs and working as an advocate between whānau and other agencies. While educators were willing to take on these roles, they pointed out there were no policy guidelines and they were not receiving professional learning development to equip them to handle these

responsibilities. In another example, an educator from a special school highlighted the stress and distress they observed in the children and whānau they worked with. She identified this as having a significant impact on her work and suggested that application processes for support and resourcing needed to be simplified (Section 4.7.3)

When discussing the impact of homelessness on educational achievement, educators noted the learning programmes aimed to deliver quality experiences and opportunities. However, these were not always able to be delivered within the nationally expected curriculum level for age, nor focused on ensuring that a child's learning success met national benchmarks. Educators were clear they were not always able to prioritise a child's academic progress (Sections 4.3.1 and 4.8). This aligns with Scanlon and McKenna (2018) who found that educators in Ireland needed to focus on improving the emotional well-being of children before they could focus on educational needs. However, the participants in this research said that prioritising hauora did not mean there was no focus on academic progress; instead, the academic goals were selected depending on where the child was in their learning (Section 4.8). Several educators considered the practice of intentionally highlighting smaller milestones to be an effective means of prompting children to consider their future aspirations, as it encouraged them to celebrate achieving a goal they had been working on. As Huia said when speaking about reporting progress to whānau, the school focuses on a "bunch of celebrations that we can share with whānau and the milestones that their child or children have made against their [own learning]." The focus on helping children feel secure and stable in their learning aligns with work by Moore (2013) and Koslouski and Stark (2021), who found that such a focus encourages children to believe they can achieve new goals, while providing them with the experience of identifying a new goal from a place of success.

5.3.2 The Ministry of Social Development

This study highlights that a regular part of an educator's role is liaising with and facilitating communication between agencies and specialists to ensure that children receive the educational or behavioural support required and that whānau understand the child's needs is. Liaising between whānau and non-education government support agencies is traditionally not part of an educator's work, though international studies have identified that educators working with social agencies can and do improve communication and provide a consistent wrap-around approach to engaging with children and whānau experiencing homelessness (Ekins, 2015; Moore, 2005; Thielking et al.,

2017). When educators took on the role of advocate, it typically meant working alongside whānau to facilitate their access to the resources they needed. Educators noted that, at the same time, they were also working as advocates for the Ministry of Social Development and WINZ (Section 4.7.2). In some cases, this took the form of actively sharing information about the pathways to support that WINZ has available. At times, this advocacy manifested through the schools' efforts to improve the community's perception of WINZ as an organisation and of the case managers working in the community from whom people could seek support. All of these efforts, as well as the support given to whānau to complete forms and understand their options, were described by participants as effective solutions to address the needs of children and whānau.

5.3.3 Housing Agencies

Educators identified housing agencies and emergency and transitional housing suppliers as contributors to the negative experiences of children and whānau experiencing homelessness in Aotearoa in multiple ways (Section 4.7.1). The potentially detrimental effect that the environment in emergency housing motels may have on the safety and overall well-being of a child and their whānau was raised by educators, with Rhonda's example in Section 4.7.1 illustrating this point. Educators noted that the lack of communication between emergency and transitional housing suppliers, both governmental and non-governmental, contributed to the stigma a child or whānau may feel or experience in the school and the broader community. This aligns with international and Aotearoa research, which highlights that an absence of clear communication pathways and guidelines can lead to the child's homelessness being known to peers, even when the child does not want it to be (Hallett et al., 2015; Vissing, 1995; Watts, 2006). They also identified that the lack of clear directive policy or guidelines in Aotearoa means that the educational needs of a child, including the protective factors of maintaining consistent belongingness and attendance at school, do not appear to be considered by agencies and organisations when they are working with whānau with school-aged children. The relevance of this finding is supported by research that states that the ability to maintain consistent school attendance is an important part of supporting children experiencing homelessness.

The educators also identified the private housing sector as a contributor to the homelessness they witnessed among their students, especially when landlords chose to increase rents to prices that were unsustainable for whānau experiencing financial

insecurity. This was discussed as one of the reasons why whānau needed to take their children not just out of school but also out of the community or region entirely. This research found that the lack of availability and affordability of rental properties can push whānau away from their community and support networks, even when they have generational or cultural ties to the area. These findings echo international studies that identify inadequate housing options as a significant barrier to children and whānau developing a sense of belonging in their communities (Haskett, 2017; Semanchin Jones et al., 2018). This research also aligns with international studies that indicate homelessness is likely to harm a child's capacity to engage meaningfully in their learning (Dudovitz & Chung, 2019).

5.3.4 Health System

All forms of homelessness may increase the risk of adverse health conditions (Aviles & Helfrich, 2006; Hallett, 2011; Masten et al., 2015; Vissing, 1995). A finding from this research is that educators and their schools were developing bespoke solutions to address health concerns, including asthma and strep throat (which can lead to rheumatic fever), often concomitant with children experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness (Section 4.3.1).

5.4 Limitations

This research restricted itself to exploring the experiences of educators working with primary and intermediate-aged students. Of the 15 participants, only five were current classroom educators, and only two of those five did not hold a form of leadership responsibility. This means that educators working in the classroom from day to day and implementing learning programmes with students who are homeless are less represented in this research. Two of the 15 participants were learning support coordinators, a position that enables an educator to work directly with children and whānau experiencing difficulties, including emotional and behavioural difficulties. Gathering perspectives from more LSCs may have added further depth. Finally, this research did not focus on the personal emotional toll, or mental–emotional stress, that educators may experience. The prompts for the conversation focused on engaging educators in discussing their

experiences of working with homeless children and whānau and the impact on their professional spaces and their work.

The interviews being conducted via Zoom imposed a limitation at times when the technology was not stable. There were times when a call dropped and had to be rejoined, which interrupted the flow of the conversation and potentially impacted the elaboration of a point.

5.5 Recommendations

5.5.1 Build Knowledge of the Scope and Impact of Homelessness into Teacher Education and Professional Development

The first recommendation from this research comes from both the recruitment process and information from the participants. During recruitment, there were times when the schools who were contacted replied that they did not have any experience with homelessness, with one response stating that their area had a high cost of living which meant that "people often move away if they are financially strained or not supported by a support service," which are conditions that do meet the definition of homelessness in Aotearoa (Statistics NZ, 2015). There were also a few instances across the interviews where the participants shared they only knew of one child who was experiencing homelessness, but through the conversation realised that they had more experience working with homeless whānau than they initially thought. As Wright et al. (2019) demonstrated, actively participating in professional learning programmes focused on childhood homelessness improves understanding and supports effective practice in educators. Initial teacher education (ITE) programmes and professional learning development courses that focus on issues relating to homelessness would benefit both the educators and the children and whānau they are working with. These programmes and courses could build understanding of the range of living situations encompassed by the term homelessness; the impact of homelessness on child health; the social stigma that children and whānau experiencing homelessness may confront; the various pathways that can lead to homelessness; and the impact of homelessness on educational engagement and achievement

5.5.2 Increase Knowledge of Trauma's impact, Trauma-Related Behaviours, and Trauma-Informed Pedagogy in Teacher Education and Professional Development

The use of trauma-informed practice is acknowledged as an effective approach to building relationships, creating caring learning environments, and supporting learner hauora and educational engagement (see Burdick & Corr, 2024; Cramer, 2018; Morgan et al., 2015; Rahimi et al., 2021). Educators in Aotearoa, as well as the children and whānau they work with, would benefit from ITE programmes with compulsory papers on understanding the impact of trauma and the identification of trauma-related behaviours. Including the development of a metaphorical kete for "trauma-informed strategies" that student-teachers can use during their in-school placements and once they are working in the classroom, would help develop and embed trauma-informed practice. The strategies taught in these papers should also consider relevant literature and be informed by a te ao Māori lens to ensure consistency in approaches to working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness in Aotearoa.

Professional learning development for qualified educators should offer courses that provide up-to-date information about trauma-informed pedagogy when working with homeless children and whānau, including the strategies that are being taught to student-teachers. This would backfill any knowledge gaps in the existing educator workforce, as well as continuing to build up the range of strategies available to educators. It would be valuable for these courses to include trauma-informed strategies with an Indigenous Māori and Pacific Nations lens, thereby ensuring that the strategies are responsive to children from these cultures, given their over-representation among those who experience homelessness (Statistics NZ, 2024).

5.5.3 Create Specific Resources for the Aotearoa Context Regarding the Purposeful Creation of a Culture of Care

The creation of an Aotearoa-focused series of resources and guides would provide schools and educators with a consistent approach to understanding and developing a whānau-focused culture of care in their school and classroom environments. These resources could be created by drawing on the knowledge and research from educators in Aotearoa education spaces at every level, as well as Aotearoa-based child psychologists. They could also draw on te ao Māori learning theories, Pacific Nations

learning theories, culturally responsive pedagogy, and trauma-informed pedagogy; by doing so, they would offer an Aotearoa-focused roadmap to creating and implementing a consistent and practical approach to working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness in their communities. The findings of this research clearly identified that teachers' and schools' consistent approaches and interactions provides a positive and protective role for children and whānau experiencing homelessness.

5.5.4 Create Specific Resources for the Aotearoa Context Regarding Working with Whānau and Children Experiencing Homelessness

This research has highlighted the need to ensure that the approaches used across schools, organisations, and agencies are in alignment to improve support. By applying a consistent approach in each of the areas with which children and whānau experiencing homelessness may engage, the system can provide a sense of stability and predictability that is beneficial for hauora (Howland et al., 2017). Furthermore, establishing a system and structure will provide a way to understand the overarching social support needs and to identify benchmarks for engaging with children and whānau (Cross et al., 2022). This concept is similar to the Aotearoa Education Council's Professional Standards, which are used for the appraisal and professional development of educators. A government-created programme and resources could be applied not just in schools but also in government agencies, including the Ministry of Social Development, the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development, and Oranga Tamariki, as well as non-government organisations. Ultimately, creating this alignment across schools, agencies, and organisations is aimed at providing a safe and predictable, or consistent, experience for children and whānau experiencing homelessness as they move between schools and regions. Working through these resources should be part of the induction process for people joining the organisation, along with regular updating of the guide during any period a person is working with children and whānau.

The development of resources for schools could begin by ensuring schools understand the importance of providing a primary contact person. It is essential to remember the centrality of trust and positive interpersonal connection that are integral to this role. Findings indicate that this person could vary from child/whānau to child/whānau and could include non-teaching staff.

5.5.5 Establish a Comprehensive Support Network That Emphasises the Importance of Communication Pathways Within and Between Schools, Agencies, and Organisations

Collaboration is needed between schools and government/non-government support organisations to establish a support network that prioritises maintaining privacy and agency for whānau while ensuring clear and consistent communication pathways. Establishing a communication network would be beneficial when a whānau is engaged with an agency and needs to move to another area. A communication template would enable the case-manager or support person in their current area to talk to whānau through the agencies or organisations that are in the area they are moving to. A structured and uniform referral template would allow for specific information about the support whānau currently receive to be shared with the organisation of their choice, thus helping to ensure that the support continues in the new area.

The template and system should ensure that power is placed in the hands of the whānau in terms of the information that is passed on. For example, the information the whānau agree to have shared may pertain to the support they have applied for and are currently receiving. Information from one organisation or agency can be communicated to either a branch of the same organisation or agency in the new area, or it can be sent to a new organisation that offers similar support. Creating a network in which agencies and organisations can communicate with each other to exchange referrals and information could address the situations described by educators in this research, where whānau felt shame or frustration at having to recount their story every time they were required to move. This communication network could also signal when whānau and children have already been onboarded into the system, thereby potentially reducing the number of children falling through the gaps in the current system. An important component to include during the creation and implementation of communication pathways and referral templates would be collaboration with whānau. This collaboration could involve ensuring whānau understand the information being shared and actively participate in filling out the referral. If implemented effectively, this could help establish continuity of the support provided. Another aspect of this system would be to give the whānau a copy of the referral and a summary of their situation, written with their input. Providing an accessible copy directly to the whānau would further help to address the issue of their having to repeat uncomfortable or traumatic stories. The Aotearoa police organisation would also be a

valuable addition to the communication network. This research highlighted stories where educators were working with whānau who had been identified or asked by the police to report on, or be an official witness in, an active investigation. Cooperation with the police has, in some instances, necessitated a quick change of location, which leads to whānau being placed in emergency housing. An organisation should not infringe on the privacy or right to have only specific information shared in certain areas. The communication system could be set up in a way that ensures information is approved by whānau, and they feel confident in the consistent and responsive approach applied to their interactions across the spectrum of agencies and organisations. In this way, a foundation for building trust in whānau can be established. If the whānau have an accessible copy of the referral, they could supply this to any support workers who want to hear the information directly from them, giving them the option to say, “Here is the referral. I affirm this information.”

Another aspect of the connected communication pathway could involve the purposeful creation of meetings where a multidisciplinary team reviews referrals and triages incoming whānau. Multidisciplinary teams could focus on homeless whānau with children to identify current needs and determine where to access or resource any necessary supports. This team could be a step towards closing the gaps that children can fall through when whānau enter a period of homelessness. There are times when negative situations arising within whānau contribute to continued homelessness or the recurrence of homelessness. In these situations, the communication needs to be wider than just housing organisations in order to understanding what has occurred and to determine what support is required externally from the housing sector. Ideally, all the agencies and organisations need to have a robust and considered method for working together based on the understanding that, in these situations, it is very rarely the case that whānau cannot find, or afford, a house in their chosen area. This research has highlighted that there are often concomitant issues, including but not limited to severe poverty, poor mental health, domestic violence, and substance abuse. Therefore, a multi-disciplinary team that includes, for example, mental health services, disability services, budgeting advisors, trauma specialists, and school representatives alongside the housing organisation would be a step towards the effective establishment of a truly wraparound service for homeless whānau and children who are ready to engage or are engaged in seeking support.

5.5.6 Ensure Housing Organisation Systems and Government Policy Are Focused on Establishing a Framework That Prioritises Safe, Affordable, and Long-Term Housing in School Zones

This research has shown that, in the Aotearoa context, when children can remain at the same school despite experiencing homelessness, there is a protective factor that mitigates the potential harm to their academic engagement and achievement. This finding is echoed by international research, and other countries have legislation that affirms the right of homeless children to attend their school of origin. There is an informed basis for housing and education systems to work together to facilitate ongoing enrolment and attendance at their school, even if they lose housing (e.g., the McKinney-Vento Act in the US; National Center for Homeless Education, 2025). A potential issue with the current emergency and transitional housing system, which has been identified in this research, is that, when whānau are placed in emergency housing, their placement is intended to be a short-term solution. However, whānau placements need to be for a period longer than 12 weeks and in a location that allows for continued school attendance. This may be resolved through a system in which whānau experiencing homelessness are given an exemption for school zone restrictions if they find suitable long-term housing in an area within commuting distance of the school although not in the official zone. . There should also be a system of funding to help transport children to school when they have been relocated a distance away that the whānau cannot manage on their own. The funding could go to the school to run a shuttle service, or it could use the established Ongoing Resourcing Scheme (ORS) funding to facilitate transportation to school via taxis. The facilitation of transportation is one way to signal to the children that they deserve to continue attending the school where their friends are and where they feel comfortable (Hallett, 2011; Hallett et al., 2015).

Regarding the children, the resources available to them should not be measured by the actions or choices of their parents/caregivers. There are punitive measures within the housing system that result in a reduction of support if, for example, the adults cause (or do not prevent) damage or engage in anti-social behaviour. If whānau are removed from housing "for cause," their children — who have specific rights, including the right to attend school — should not be disadvantaged. Therefore, policy should reflect not only that the child has the right to attend the school but also that they have the right to attend the school where they are established. This should be a funding resource that is allocated

to the child and managed by the school so that they can attend their school of choice. Homeless children should receive funding that covers their transportation to school, food while at school, uniform and/or stationery costs, and engagement in any EOTC or in-school events and programmes.

5.6 Implications for Future Research

This research has contributed valuable knowledge to the study of the intersection between homelessness, education spaces, and the work of educators in Aotearoa. To expand this knowledge, further research involving educators should explore the structures they are working within, areas identified for improvement, and the mental-emotional impact on them when they are working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness. Expanding the recruitment population by including ECE and Secondary School educators would add further depth to the range of experiences, including those that are shared and unique, at different schooling levels

In addition, focused research on gathering the voices of children aged between 6 and 13 would be valuable. Research on child voice needs to be explored in the Aotearoa context because children have the right to give input and have a say in areas that directly impact them (Graham et al., 2013). Homelessness, educational participation, and academic achievement all directly relate to the lives of children. In addition to being required to be at school, they have a right to be there. I have not been able to locate Aotearoa-based research that specifically captures the voices of children experiencing homelessness, including what they believe they require, what would be beneficial for them as they strive to stay in school and continue learning, and how to identify and pursue their dreams. Having that information could create a more rounded and fully informed foundation upon which future policy, resources, guides, and programmes may be made and rolled out. Such research could also provide a benchmark for child voice, meaning that subsequent child voice research into homelessness after resources or programmes have been implemented could be used to identify whether the intended benefit has been achieved and where gaps may still exist.

5.7 Conclusion

Educators in Aotearoa understand that it is the right of every child to feel they belong and are valued in their spaces — and that their ideas and feelings are

acknowledged and respected. Adverse childhood experiences, such as homelessness, result in takahia te mana o te tamaiti (belittling and trampling of the essence of the child) (Asmundson & Afifi, 2019; Mersky et al., 2017; Sheffler et al., 2019; Zarse, 2019). Educators and education spaces are supposed to whakamana te tamaiti (empower the child) by using a range of teaching practices. Their learning spaces aim to piki ake te mana o te tamaiti (uplift the essence of the child) and provide them with strands comprising skills, strategies, experiences, and knowledge with which they can weave the whāriki that will eventually become he kete mātauranga (their Basket of Knowledge). Their kete mātauranga will be carried with them as they leave school and enter adulthood (Biesta, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2007; Roosevelt, 2008; Smith, 2007). Children and whānau who experience homelessness in Aotearoa need support and deserve to find their tūrangawaewae (place to stand), a lifeline that provides stability, and a kōhatu (rock) to hold on to.

Children's interactions with educators and their participation in education can be essential for identifying interests, talents, and strengths, developing them, and accessing pathways that support each child's aspirational goals for a stable, happy, and prosperous future. Educators in Aotearoa have an ever-expanding role to support learning and social-emotional development not only within the classroom programme and school environment but also in the home lives of children and whānau experiencing homelessness.

This research provides much-needed insights by focusing on the impact of homelessness in educational spaces as expressed through educators' voices. The educators have provided details about the effects that supporting homeless children and whānau have on educators' work and the role that Aotearoa schools and educators are currently playing in helping children and whānau who are experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, this research has provided insight into the resources and supports that educators and schools are creating or drawing from when working with children and whānau experiencing homelessness.

Such experiences and actions that are occurring in educational spaces are an essential part of understanding the impact of childhood homelessness on these spaces in Aotearoa. There is very little research, if any, involving educator perspectives on working with children experiencing homelessness in the Aotearoa context. The literature does not yet capture or discuss the impact of childhood homelessness as educators see it through

their interactions with children and whānau and through their work with other agencies and organisations. As such, this research begins to address this gap by bringing light to the wide range of work educators do to support whānau and the impacts they have, both observed and reported, when helping children and whānau. This research also highlights how children's behaviours illustrate aspects of their sense of belonging and their engagement with society and education when experiencing homelessness. Using educators' perspectives can illuminate how educators' work is expanding through their work with affected children and how educators understand the impact that homelessness has on children and whānau. The educators in this research highlighted the role they played in addressing ways to prevent homelessness among at-risk whānau. This included sharing their perspectives about how the education system currently creates barriers to the work educators undertake when supporting whānau. Furthermore, this research describes several systems and approaches that some Aotearoa schools and educators are employing, with some success, as a mitigating and supporting factor in helping whānau access support and resources that promote the establishment of safe, stable housing.

There are many aspects of undertaking this PhD that have been challenging and have required careful consideration and reflection to ensure that the purpose of the knowledge creation I am working towards remains at the forefront. I have worked to maintain focus on the topic and on the people whose voices and experiences I am trying to bring into the conversations around homelessness and Aotearoa's housing crisis. Their work is expansive, challenging, and, as shown in this research, often unacknowledged or unsupported by the organisations, agencies, and systems that are intended to support children and whānau. This research has shown that educators in Aotearoa may become as close to whānau as actual whānau or close friends due to the amount of time they spend, both during and outside of school hours, trying to wrap a cloak of support around the child and whānau to prevent some of the harm related to housing insecurity or homelessness.

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