

23 – 25 July 2026

Copenhagen , Denmark

From Awareness to Action: Preparing Pre-Service Teachers to Support Homeless Children

San-Marié Weyers

The Independent Institute of Education, Emeris, Faculty of Education, South Africa

Abstract

Homelessness is a complex, but prevalent phenomenon that affects 100 million to one billion people worldwide. The consequent reality of vulnerable children growing up in homeless contexts is inevitable, and educators are increasingly required to support such learners. However, pre-service teachers (PSTs) receive limited, if any, preparation during their training to work with vulnerable populations who face unique challenges, such as these children. The aim of this study was therefore to explore how a series of informative sessions, discussions, and experiential learning at a homeless shelter shaped the meaning perspectives, self-efficacy, and readiness of 20 final-year PSTs to provide educational support to homeless children. An instrumental case study design, informed by Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (TLT), guided the research process. Data from open-ended questionnaires administered before and after the PSTs' involvement in a tutoring initiative at the shelter were analysed using a hybrid deductive-inductive approach with reflexive thematic analysis. TLT guided the identification of patterns deductively, while also allowing themes to emerge inductively. The findings revealed key shifts in PSTs' deficit-based assumptions to a deeper understanding and connection with homelessness. Participants reported improved subject knowledge through providing one-on-one tutoring support, increased confidence in adapting their instruction in low-resourced contexts with unique challenges and a stronger sense of professional responsibility to support vulnerable children, which contributed to a socially responsive teacher identity. The study highlights the value of experiential and community-engaged learning in preparing future teachers to support vulnerable learners within unequal educational contexts.

Keywords: Experiential Learning; Homelessness; Teacher Self-Efficacy; Transformative Learning Theory; Pre-Service Teacher Education