

*Educational Implications for Children in Homeless Shelters and Beyond: Implications for All  
Educators and Child Advocates*

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*Family Homelessness: The Significance of the Problem*

Research has estimated that there are about two million homeless children in the country (Nunez, 1994; Whitlock, 1994). According to the Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, one of the most recognized organizations devoted to homelessness in Chicago, homelessness is on the rise. Between 1998 and 2002, emergency warming center beds for families in Chicago increased from 150 to 565, and emergency beds for single women increased from 40 to 170. Compared to the previous year, Chicago in 2001 had a 22 percent increase in requests for emergency shelter and a 35 percent increase in requests for shelter by families. Furthermore, it has been documented that upon leaving a Chicago transitional shelter (four-month program), only 17.5 percent of the residents have been able access permanent housing. Importantly, recent surveys of shelters in Illinois reported an 80 percent increase in family homelessness in the city, the result that supports the assumption that women and children significantly impacted by the recent increases in homelessness (Chicago Coalition for the Homeless, 2004).

Research on homelessness covers a wide variety of areas. These areas include but are not limited to the historical perspectives on homelessness, the causes of homelessness, mental health issues among the homeless, homeless populations (such as elderly, minorities and veterans), the availability of programs for the homeless, housing related issues, legal issues pertaining to homelessness, homeless women, and homeless families with children (Katz, 1989, Henslin, 1993, Whitlock, 1994). Homeless families with children in general and homeless children in particular have been an under-researched population (Roseman, 1990, Vissing, 1996). These topics are more often covered in literature which “crosses interdisciplinary lines” (Henslin, 1993, p. ix). Past literature on homeless children focused on homeless youth and runaway homeless children, and on children living in welfare hotels, emergency shelters and residential shelters. It also focused on their medical and psychological needs. However research on the educational lives of homeless children was limited, and is limited..

Research on the effects of living in a shelter presents a grim picture (Bassuk, 1986b; Nunez, 1994). “Homes embody the history, memories, and experiences that shape who we are” (Vissing, 1996, p. 79), and loss of a home can have a devastating impact on a child. Children grieve the loss of their homes. “I miss my house and yard. There we had a dog, but we had to get rid of him when we moved. I had this special tree I played under. I had my own room, and a window that overlooked the street. I miss my neighbors and friends too. I want to go home” (Vissing, 1996, p. 79). According to past and current studies, shelter living infringes on the families' abilities to provide their children with social and emotional comfort conducive to learning.

There are obvious differences between a homeless shelter and a home. “Shelter if it’s warm and safe, may keep a family from dying. Only a home allows a family to flourish and to breathe. When breath comes hard, when privacy is scarce, when chaos and crisis are on every side, it is

difficult to live at peace, even with someone whom we love" (Kozol, 1982, p. 50). Living at a shelter produces a new set of stresses for homeless children (Riblin, 1985; Roseman, 1990; Seltser, 1993; Wright, 1990).

Many shelters are overcrowded; they lack privacy, child-care facilities, and job training opportunities. Although the parents are thankful to have a place to stay, they compromise by losing their independence and their ability to raise their children (Bassuk, 1986a). "Shelter life begins to represent disappointments and threats to their dignity" (Seltser, 1993).

Most homeless shelters have limited space. There is seldom any place to go and sit down for a private conversation (Boxill, 1990a; Kozol, 1988). This lack of privacy prevents mothers from disciplining their children in ways that maintain respect for the family. Furthermore, it is not uncommon for children to be disciplined by non-family members.

Research on mother/child interaction at homeless shelters elucidates the hardships faced by the mothers and their children. Since most of the residential shelters are overcrowded, mothers are forced to mother their children in public. "Every aspect and nuance of the mother/child relationship occurs and is affected by its public and often scrutinized nature" (Boxill, 1990b, p. 58). Research also shows that the mother's role "unravels" in this communal setting (Boxill, 1990b, p. 59). The mothers at the shelter feel controlled and helpless: "I don't feel like I control anything" (Boxill, 1990, p. 60). "The traditional role of the mother as provider, family leader, organizer and standard-setter" (p. 60) is diminished in a shelter. Shelter administrators determine where the family eats, bathes, and rests. Shelter rules also create barriers. There are set schedules for mealtimes and bedtimes.

Recent studies evaluating shelter conditions conclude that there is an urgent need to change the inadequate shelter programs to meet the needs of families and children (Nunez, 1994). Nunez offers a model for serving the needs of homeless families. He emphasizes that the key to breaking the cycle of homelessness is educating the children and their families. The shelters should move away from simply providing temporary solutions to homeless families, to providing them with opportunities to break the cycle of homelessness. For example, shelters need to develop early childhood programs, provide adult education and job training, provide preventive health care programs, develop crises nursery programs, and most importantly, design programs that permit homeless families to remain together.

In light of the challenges of shelter living, it is to be expected that the prospect of an education for their children would be a source of hope for homeless families seeking to eventually break the cycle. The sad truth is, however, that attempting to provide their children with an education often adds to the families' frustrations (Vissing, 1996).

Vissing's (1996) research on homeless families and children in rural areas highlights some of the administrative roadblocks encountered by these families in securing an education for their children. For example, homeless families are often prevented from enrolling their children in public schools due to their inability to provide age, health, and educational records. These families may also have difficulties providing guardianship papers. Because of the families' constant mobility, many of these records are lost, and dates are forgotten. Furthermore, many homeless families have difficulty getting records transferred from one state to another or from one school to another.

As one school counselor explained, "These mothers come in... they're so frustrated and they've got enough on their minds. They don't know where the social security numbers are, and all of these silly things that the schools require. It is hard to have all the immunization records. We can bend the rules, but we can't break them" (Vissing, 1996, p. 93). Schools are flexible about enrolling a child who may not have all the academic records, but they are not flexible about missing immunization records. This means that if a family cannot retrieve the records in a month, the child has to receive a new battery of shots.

Another administrative dilemma faced by homeless families is providing the school with an address, phone number, and emergency contact information. Since families might be in transition from one shelter to another, they are unable to provide this information. Many parents are also unwilling to tell school officials about their homelessness out of fear that the child might be stigmatized in school. Therefore, the parents falsify information. This has its own risks. For example, at one school, a homeless child became ill, but his mother could not be contacted because of the false contact numbers she had given the school. The child finally told school authorities that he lived in an emergency shelter at night, and his mother searched for a job during the day (Vissing, 1996).

In addition these children show signs of depression, low self-esteem, and anger. Depression is common among children who are homeless (Nunez, 1994). The inability to control their lives leads to emotional problems (Molnar, 1990). At school they experience difficulties in making friends. They are ashamed of their homeless status, and they are fearful that their peers will discover that they are homeless. Their inability to maintain friendships stems from a lack of "security, orderliness, and belonging" (Vissing, 1997, p. 77).

These problems are aggravated by the lack of parental support these children receive at school. Homeless parent involvement is limited in schools, because of the families' lack of resources, and because they believe they do not have influence over their children's education. Parents are typically contacted by the schools only if the child is experiencing difficulties. However, since the mobility rate is high among the homeless population, and since energy is spent elsewhere, the families can do little to address the academic concerns raised by teachers.

Topping it all off is the fact that schools simply are not designed with homeless children in mind. Educators in recent studies admitted that although schools help in identifying and helping children at risk, "school structure and policies also contributed to the children's academic problems" (Kozol, 1988; Lively, 1996; Nunez, 1994; Rafferty, 1989; Vissing, 1996, p. 91). Most schools are designed to educate a stable child with a stable residence. Each semester at school builds on the previous semester's work. For homeless children, it is extremely difficult to succeed in school since they have to move from shelter to shelter frequently.

Studies on teenagers who are homeless show that "many children were not destroyed by their homelessness" (Vissing, 1992, p. 98). They made efforts to come to school regularly despite their daily living conditions and work schedules. In fact, school officials have been awed by the dedication shown by homeless children to come to school. A school nurse expressed her amazement at the strength she saw displayed by homeless children: "If I had to manage all they do, I couldn't pull it together to do all they do. But day after day, they hold their heads up high as they walk through the front doors of school" (p. 98).

While the McKinney Act has attempted to remove some obstacles to education for a growing population of homeless children and while there have been efforts to study various aspects of homelessness, there is an urgent need for better understandings on how best to serve children in shelters.

Since education is considered the key to breaking the cycle of homelessness (Bassuk & Gallanger, 1990; Nunez, 1994; Vissing, 1996), and early literacy development is closely linked to later academic success (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988), it is imperative that we closely re-examine educational opportunities and interventions of young homeless children.

### *Directions for the Future*

#### *Restructuring Shelter Programs*

Shelter environments have not been explored in terms of opportunities for literacy interventions. This situation may stem from societal view of the role of shelters as merely temporary housing facilities for people who are homeless, not centers of learning such as schools and home communities. Because shelters serve large numbers of children in poverty, sometimes over a long period of time (Henslin, 1993; Vissing, 1996), it is crucial to assist the shelters in expanding their roles beyond that of solely 'emergency operations'. In particular, engaging homeless children and families in meaningful literacy activities is of critical importance given that education is considered to be the key to breaking the cycle of homelessness (Bassuk & Gallanger, 1990; Nunez, 1994; Rafferty & Rollins, 1989; Vissing, 1996), and early literacy development is closely linked to later academic success (Roth et al., 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988).

Although a four-month residential shelter is designed as an emergency operation, what shelter directors, policy-makers and researchers need to realize is that for many homeless families, four months is as much stability as they will get if they do not get opportunities to break the cycle of homelessness. There has to be accountability about the shelter resources. Since the shelter is responsible for funding programs like parenting, playgroup, and computer training, it is imperative that these programs be restructured to meet the needs of all the children. Homeless families use the shelter as the last resort when all other resources are exhausted. The shelter as an institution is the only stable entity in the lives of many homeless families. It needs to use every opportunity to equip the families with meaningful tools that they can use to lift themselves and their children out of poverty. The resources that are in place need to alleviate the stress of homeless families, and they need to focus on the needs of all the children. The directors should ensure that the caregivers at shelter find meaningful ways to support children's literacy growth utilizing their daily routines and incorporate events such as storybook reading, pretend play, writing, speaking, and listening (Pellegrini & Galda, 1992). Also, the family as a whole should be involved in designing and implementing programs for their children.

In addition to providing resources and personnel to develop these shared reading sessions, shelter should incorporate the help of literate school-age children and their mothers. While the responsibility of providing literacy opportunities should not solely fall on these older children, the staff needs to understand that they are a very valuable resource. Book incentives, field trips and other leisure opportunities should be provided to these children to encourage them to provide the one-on-one reading instruction to their younger peers.

The research on emergent literacy has provided us with insight into the social nature of literacy development. We know that literacy development involves "both learning (on the part of the child) and teaching (on the part of the parents or other significant literate persons in the child's environment)" (Teale, 1982, p. 317). Many studies have described characteristics of homes that are "literacy-rich" (Durkin, 1966; Hoskisson, 1979; Teale, 1982; Heath, 1983; Taylor, 1983; Morrow, 1989). Several shared qualities present in these homes, point to social interactions, as crucial for the emergent literacy development in children. Specifically, parents in these homes respond positively to children's interactions around reading and writing and they provide the children with opportunities to interact with print. Further, children are surrounded by a variety of reading materials, making print in the home being easily available to interact with. Children in these homes also observe the function of writing in relevant activities, and have multiple opportunities to write themselves (referred to as "pencil and paper kids" in Durkin, 1966). Importantly, one of the most significant ways in which parents in these homes engage their children in meaningful literacy interactions was through shared book reading. In recognition of the importance of this family interaction for children's literacy Strickland and Morrow stated that shared book reading is "undoubtedly one of the most powerful catalysts for young children's language and literacy development" (1989, p. 29).

The importance of "literacy rich" environment for children's literacy development has been thoroughly documented in key literature on children's literacy development (Durkin, 1966; King & Friesen, 1972; Morrow, 1989; Neuman, 1999; Plessas & Oakes, 1964; Snow & Dickinson, 1990; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1984). In an ethnographic study of community-based learning, Heath (1983) has documented the impact of the physical environment and children's social interactions with adults within their environment on their literacy activities. For example, young children from working class families interacted with older children who have learned to read to perform the tasks their daily life requires. Furthermore, they had several opportunities to "practice under the indirect supervision of older children" (p. 192). These children also watched adults read and write for a variety of purposes.

#### *Introducing Shared Book Reading Sessions*

Since children and families at the shelter have unstructured time and they feel a sense of loss and grief, books can undoubtedly provide leisure and education. Shelter staff literate parents, school aged children and community volunteers can create reading sessions with the families and specifically with the children in age appropriate group sessions. We know that shared book reading is "undoubtedly one of the most powerful catalysts for young children's language and literacy development" (Strickland & Morrow, 1989, p. 29). Research on the importance of shared book reading indicates that parents and older siblings who regularly read to the young children assisted in the children's early literacy development (Morrow, 1989; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Taylor, 1983; Teale, 1984), and facilitated their natural interest in books (Durkin, 1966; King & Friesen, 1972; Plessas & Oakes, 1964). The interaction involved in shared book reading also improves the educational outcomes for young children (Taylor, 1983; Strickland & Morrow, 1989). In fact "no other single activity is regarded as important as the shared experience between caregivers and children" (Neuman, 1999, p. 286).

#### *Creating Opportunities for Personal Narratives*

Children at the shelter need to express their feelings to listening and attentive adults since they need an outlet for their frustrations. The educational impact of narratives should not be

underestimated. Children who are able to produce narratives conforming to the forms expected at school participate in classroom discourse more effectively, become more competent writers, and are evaluated by their teachers as better students than peers who fail to meet school standards of narrative performance (Heath, 1983; Snow & Dickinson, 1990). Narrative abilities have also been found to be a significant predictor of concurrent and long-term decoding and reading comprehension skills in low-income 6- and 7-year-olds with reading and/or language difficulties (Feagans & Applebaum, 1986; Feagans & Short, 1984). Noteworthy, the contribution of narrative skills to literacy achievement increases in older children who have made a successful transition to fluent reading (Roth et al., 1996).

The facilitative effects of narrative abilities on children's literacy achievement stem from the fact that narratives constitute a distinct cognitive framework for representing human action and social interaction that contextualizes abstract concepts and allows personally meaningful integration of prior experience with new knowledge (Bruner, 1986, 1990, 1991; Bruner & Lucariello, 1989; Egan, 1999, Olson, 1990; Wells, 1986). As a meaning-making strategy, narratives facilitate children's interpretation of literature, leading to deeper understandings of cultural beliefs and practices (Miller, 1988) and more meaningful participation in classroom learning (Egan, 1993, Hicks, 1995-1996, Wells & Chang-Wells, 1992). The benefits of enriched use of narrative forms of meaning making for understanding of, and engagement in, textual content has been recently documented in urban struggling readers (Zigo, 1998, 2001). When encouraged to use narrative forms of interpretation, in conjunction with text based lessons, these students demonstrated increased engagement with textual content, use of critical thinking strategies, and retention of content-specific vocabulary. Furthermore, Miller and Legge (1999) documented that at-risk struggling readers and writers were able to maintain such gains over time, increasing their independence as critical readers capable of rich and complex interpretations of texts.

#### *Educational Implications for Teachers*

Teachers in general need to realize that they will have a diverse population of children in their classrooms, including children who are homeless. It is very important that teachers learn about the family's circumstances in a respectable manner. They should make the child comfortable in the classroom. Some of the basic educational needs of children who are homeless include completing homework and finding a quiet place to study. Teachers can structure time during the day when these children can get some personal space and attention to complete assignments and homework. Since many such children come to school hungry, teachers should also allow the students an opportunity to have breakfast in the morning. Although many homeless children move from school to school, teachers need to make them feel wanted and make sure that the children are included in all educational activities.

The special education staff at the schools should work together with the general educators in assessing the children who show signs of academic problems, and they can, as a team, work with the teachers in modifying the curriculum to meet the needs of individual students. Special educators have to work with the general education teachers in addressing the needs of all students, providing additional help without stigmatizing the children. Providing segregated remedial instruction is not the solution (Quint, 1994). According to Quint, studies such as those conducted by Garcia, Jimenez, and Pearson (1989) of at-risk children show that homeless children received minimal instruction, and they never learned the necessary comprehension strategies needed for interpretation of texts. Part of the solution lies in equipping homeless children with strategies instead of wasting valuable time in rote information and drills. Both

general and special education teachers need to engage these children in reading by involving them in "group discussion of the author's purpose, the drawing of inferences, and the summarization of themes" (Quint, 1994, p. 114).

In light of research findings regarding these families and their children, policy makers need to come forward with solutions. They need to involve the parents, shelter directors, and the children themselves. The first step in constructing any program to increase parent participation is viewing parents as potential allies rather than adversaries (Harry, 1995).

Researchers need to explore new methodologies when studying underprivileged and transient populations in terms of data collection, and when assessing the researcher's attachment to the participants in the study.

### *Conclusions*

To be successful readers and writers, these children need to be guided toward literacy competencies through group discussion of the textual content and purposes, inferencing about various textual components, and summarization of main ideas and themes (Quint, 1994). Shared book reading should be linked to narrating about personal experience related to the content of reading. Literacy development has been shown to be strongly correlated with children's narrative abilities - one of the most significant correlates of various aspects of reading achievement (Feagans & Applebaum, 1986; Roth et al., 1996), as well as student participation in classroom discourse and engagement in school tasks (Feagans, 1982, Heath, 1983; Hicks, 1995-1996; Snow & Dickinson, 1990). Engaging homeless children in these activities is of critical importance given that early literacy development is closely linked to later academic success (Roth et al., 1996; Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988). By providing homeless children with critical thinking and personally meaningful literacy activities appears to be a possible solution to addressing comprehension problems of homeless children. In contrast to a focus on rote information and drills, these experiences will equip them with literacy learning strategies necessary for becoming independent and reflective readers.

If being literate improves the chances of a child's social and economical success in society, and that it can facilitate a child's transition out of poverty, then it becomes society's obligation to provide opportunities to children in homeless shelter. The shelter as an institution is the only stable entity in the lives of many homeless families. With the realization that literacy intervention will provide homeless children with skills to succeed in school and possibly out of homelessness, the shelter staff can develop meaningful ways to support children's literacy growth utilizing their daily routines and incorporating literacy events such as storybook reading, pretend play, oral narrating, writing, speaking, and listening. Ultimately, the whole family should be involved in designing and implementing programs for their children.

Further studies will provide shelter directors, policy makers, educators, and other professionals working with homeless children with valuable insights necessary for designing literacy educational programs responsive to homeless children's unique experiences, needs, and interests. Researchers can expand on the existing research on homelessness to understand how children perceive their living in shelters and how these children can be assisted in dealing with these experiences by telling and retelling of their personal and text based narratives. Also, research questions related to exploring strategies that are most effective for children in poverty need

further attention in addition to the possibility of using multiple types of text genres, including narrative and expository texts, to enhance and enrich literacy and narrative skills.

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