



Literacy, Education, and Inequality: Assimilation and Resistance Narratives from Families Residing at a Homeless Shelter

Mary M. Jacobs, Cornell College

Abstract

In this article, I draw on data from my qualitative dissertation study of the literacy practices of five families who resided in a homeless shelter to complicate the relationship between literacy, education, and inequality. Homelessness is examined through the lens of sponsorship to understand the differential access the families have to powerful sponsors of literacy and how schools and the marketplace may dismiss existing literacies that families use in their everyday lives. Their assimilation narratives reveal that the parents believed strongly in the promise of education to change the life trajectory of their children. Parents engaged in literacy for social and cultural purposes as well as middle class literacy practices that are valued in schools. Despite these attempts to assimilate, the parents and the children in the study did not benefit in significant ways and continually struggled against and resisted deficit perspectives surrounding homelessness and the inner city neighborhoods from which they came. The wide gulf between the official portrait of homelessness, largely defined by statistics and influenced by deficit perspectives, and the counterportraits that illustrate the lived realities of the families suggests educational reform must address the larger context of inequality in the United States.

Keywords: family literacy sponsorship, homeless shelter

“Brianna retrieved the Bible from a stack of three identical bright pink books on the bedside table. She quickly flipped to a page bookmarked with a bracelet. On page 936 of the book, titled God’s Word for Girls, Brianna squinted to read the tiny print. She determined her mother would be reading on the topic of love next. ‘I braid my mom’s hair while she reads the Bible.’”

Introduction

Beginning in June of 2011, one day a week I visited a local shelter to facilitate a family art and story hour for parents and children. Many of the families who resided at the shelter, like Brianna’s, voluntarily participated in the program. During my weekly visits I engaged with families for a variety of purposes related to literacy tied to their lives in and out of school. I noticed both

parents and children initiated literacy practices that served the purpose of meeting school expectations such as homework, but also routines and rituals that sustained their long days at the shelter where they had limited privacy and often were a long distance from their extended families. I wanted to know more about the literacy practices families engaged in while experiencing homelessness and how their life, literacy, and schooling histories shaped what they believed was possible once they transitioned from the shelter. After six months of facilitating the family art and story hour, I began a qualitative research study to examine the literacy practices of families within the context of homelessness.

Located in a Mid-western university town that I will refer to as College Town, with a population of approximately 70,000, the transitional shelter where the families resided was a highly contested community issue before its completion in November 2010. Formerly located in an old house nestled in amongst single-family homes and rental properties just a few blocks from the community's downtown and university campus, the decision was made to build the new shelter several miles from this location in an area reputable for low-income housing and heightened police presence, increasing the distance between the shelter residents and many of the community services available to them. Conversely, the new facility offers more benefits to families than the old site. The new building is able to provide rooms for families, located in a separate wing from the women's and men's dormitories. On the second floor is a room devoted to children stocked with donated toys and books. This is the setting in which the family art and story hour took place.

According to the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress, of 610,042 people experiencing homelessness on a given night in January of 2013, 65 percent were living in emergency shelters or transitional housing programs and 23 percent were children, under the age of 18.¹ 222,197 people in families experienced homelessness, which accounts for 36 percent of all homeless people and approximately 50 percent of people living in shelters.² The families in the study came to the shelter for diverse reasons. In Brianna's family's case, chronic homelessness caused by a lack of steady employment and the gun violence of their former Chicago neighborhood pushed her mother, Sandy, to move her three daughters, Brittany (13), Julien (11), and Brianna (9) to a shelter in a nearby state.³

The purpose of this article is to illuminate the literacy practices and beliefs of families who resided at the shelter and the stories parents told about their lives to examine the challenges of homelessness. Based on the narratives that emerged from the parent stories, families believed their lives were not finalized, but could improve despite struggles with steady employment and secure housing. Parent optimism for the future was strongly supported by their common belief that education played a key role in changing their children's lives for the better. In this article, it is my intention to complicate the relationship between what the families valued about education and the neoliberal policies that do little to address differential access within the context of sharply rising standards for literacy⁴ and increasing inequality.⁵

My role as the facilitator of the art and story hour illustrates the notion of literacy spon-

1. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, "The 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) To Congress," 2013, accessed October 25, 2014, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/ahar-2013-part1.pdf>, 6.

2. Ibid., 22.

3. Alex Kotlowitz, *The Interrupters*, On-line Documentary, Directed by Steve James (Chicago: Kartemquin Films, 2011), accessed August 7, 2014, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters>.

4. Deborah Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

5. Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level* (London: Penguin Books, 2010).

sorship.⁶ Sponsors of literacy, both in and out of school settings, shape the contexts in which people engage in literacy practices. Deborah Brandt describes sponsors of literacy as “...any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, and model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold, literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way”.⁷ While literacy sponsorship is often regarded as a benevolent act of helping others, access to literacy sponsors of one kind or another is often distributed along class lines. Social and cultural differences, past experiences with schooling and the sponsor’s expectations for the participants complicate the potential of literacy sponsorship to both constrain and empower individuals. In the context of the family art and story hour, I attempted to engage in literacy sponsorship by co-authoring activities with participating families related to their social and cultural goals such as play, reflection, and messages to loved ones, but also to provide support for navigating the bureaucratic texts of housing, employment, and school.⁸ Even as a researcher intent on revealing the complexity of family literacy in the context of homelessness, at times I did more to constrain literacy practices than to recognize and value them during the family art and story hour.

Literacy cannot be separated from the material conditions and social relations in which individuals make sense of their lives.⁹ Literacy events happen within a social context, in a particular place and time. In this way, literacy practices are culturally constructed and historically situated¹⁰ and change with the times and within the society of which they are a part.¹¹ Drawing on critical sociocultural theory, Brian Street uses the term “ideological model” to describe the rich cultural variation of literacy practices in different contexts.¹² He contends, “literacy practices are aspects not only of ‘culture’ but also of power structures” and suggests the dominant approach to defining literacy, the “autonomous” model, disguises the power relations inherent in literacy practices through its position of neutrality.¹³ Reducing literacy to a neutral set of skills dismissive of context privileges particular literacies, rigidly defines what is proper, and marginalizes the diverse ways people use literacy. The ideological model concerns not only the literacy events and practices that occur within them, but the ideological preconceptions that are embedded in them.¹⁴

The conceptualization of literacy as an ideological practice rather than a neutral cognitive tool of individuals complicates issues of power and privilege as they relate to class and cultural backgrounds. When individuals and groups engage in literacy for social and cultural purposes, opportunities for raising social consciousness and imagining new possibilities can emerge.¹⁵ School literacy is more akin to the formal acquisition of reading and writing skills and often does not connect strongly with the lived realities of students.¹⁶ The school literacy that many students from historically underserved groups experience undermines what they know and can do,¹⁷ and

6. Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives*.

7. *Ibid.*, 19.

8. Denny Taylor, *Toxic Literacies* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996).

9. Brian Street, “The New Literacy Studies,” in *Literacy: a Critical Sourcebook*, ed. E.L. Cushman, et al. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2001).

10. Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives*.

11. David Barton and Mary Hamilton, *Local Literacies* (London: Routledge, 1998).

12. Street, “The New Literacy Studies.”

13. *Ibid.*, 434.

14. Street, “The New Literacy Studies.”

15. Frank Smith, “Overselling Literacy,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 70, no. 5 (1989): 352-59.

16. Debbie Smith and Kathryn F. Whitmore, *Literacy And Advocacy In Adolescent Family, Gang, School, And Juvenile Court Communities* (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006).

17. James Paul Gee, *Situated Language and Learning* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

rarely invites them to engage in critical literacies that allow them to question the status quo from a position of marginality.¹⁸ Neoliberal education policy ascribes value to particular literacy practices within the institution of school, while limiting and denying access to people on the margins of these practices, boosted by economic policies that lead to racial, ethnic, and class exclusion such as gentrification and the encroaching privatization of education.¹⁹

Neoliberal education policy, which privileges the “autonomous” model of literacy, upholds the rich/poor gap in terms of socioeconomic, sociopolitical and sociocultural power through the naturalization of white middle-class ways of knowing.²⁰ Wider interpretations of what constitutes literacy practices within an ideological model of literacy, such as Brianna’s family’s Bible reading ritual, are paramount to understanding and valuing the literacies families on the margins of middle-class discourses possess.

Literature Review

Historically, family literacy has been studied from the perspective of schools and has been largely defined as parental involvement in school.²¹ For this reason, families from underrepresented groups who have limited access to school discourse and practices are frequently targeted for school-to-home literacy initiatives in order to increase parental involvement.²² Family literacy research is often related to family literacy programs that intend to strengthen the literacy of the home by engaging families outside of school in school literacy practices closely aligned with white middle class ways of knowing.²³ This thinking is largely based on a cultural deficit model which attempts to explain failure in school by blaming families and the literacy practices, or lack thereof in the home.²⁴ Additionally, a recent review of family literacy scholarship by Catherine Compton-Lilly, Rebecca Rogers, and Tisha Y. Lewis reveals a dominance of white female scholars in family literacy research and limited concern for issues of diversity in a majority of family literacy studies.²⁵

The number of studies on adult literacy pales in comparison to the extensive body of research on childhood literacy. Much of the existing literature on adult literacy tends to put emphasis on remediation in adult literacy programs.²⁶ This may be due to a dominant belief in society that literacy is a final outcome measured by school achievement. For the purposes of the larger

18. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 2000).

19. Pauline Lipman, *The New Political Economy of Urban Education* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

20. Street, “The New Literacy Studies.”

21. Elsa Roberts Auerbach, “Toward A Social-Contextual Approach To Family Literacy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 2 (1989): 165-182.

22. Curt Dudley-Marling, “Home-School Literacy Connections: The Perceptions of African American and Immigrant ESL Parents in Two Urban Communities,” *The Teachers College Record* 111, no. 7 (1989): 1713-1752.

23. Shirley Brice Heath, *Ways With Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Deborah Hicks, *Reading Lives* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002); Rebecca Rogers, “Between Contexts: A Critical Discourse Analysis Of Family Literacy, Discursive Practices, And Literate Subjectivities,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2002): 248-277; Denny Taylor and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines, *Growing Up Literate* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1988).

24. Brian Street, “Family Literacy and the Politics of Literacy,” in *Many Families, Many Literacies: An International Declaration Of Principles* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997), 207-210.

25. Catherine Compton-Lilly, Rebecca Rogers, and Tisha Y Lewis, “Analyzing Epistemological Considerations Related to Diversity: an Integrative Critical Literature Review of Family Literacy Scholarship,” *Reading Research Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2012): 33-60.

26. Eric J. Weiner, “Keeping Adults Behind: Adult Literacy Education in the Age of Official Reading Regimes,” *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49, no. 4 (2005): 286-301.

study on which this article is based, I reviewed studies of adult literacy that examine the literacy practices in the everyday lives of adults; particularly adults who are marginalized and whose voices are often silenced by notions of literacy as simply academic achievement.²⁷

Even more scant than the studies on adult literacy is the research on family literacy in a shelter setting. Laurie MacGillivray, Amy Lassiter Ardell, and Margaret Saucedo Curwen examined the literacies of families living in homeless shelters using a qualitative design with participant observation and over 70 interviews to illuminate five unique and critical perspectives that illustrate the complexity surrounding children who live without permanent homes.²⁸ Additionally, MacGillivray, Ardell, and Curwen examined the literacy practices of mothers and children living in a transitional shelter and the institutions that influenced these practices: libraries, churches and schools.²⁹ The researchers examined the different ways mothers and children talked about their literacy practices across these three institutions. The library and church were contexts for choosing literacy practices that were meaningful to the families, whereas talk about *school* literacy focused on evaluation, daily routines and procedures. Judith Wells Lindfors (2008) studied early interactions with books and written text during her work at SafePlace, a classroom for kindergarten and first grade children at a domestic violence shelter where the children resided with their mothers.³⁰ Lindfors' work acknowledges that children living without homes, like all children, need to engage with reading and writing experiences connected to their lived realities.

More research is needed to understand literacy in the lives of families experiencing homelessness and the larger implications of the intersection between literacy and inequality. My research attempts to contest the dominant deficit perspectives about homelessness by complicating what it means to be homeless in an era of politics and schooling that yields starkly disproportionate advantages to privileged individuals who can compete in an increasingly global and corporate marketplace.³¹

Methods

The study on which this article is based attempted to understand the literacy practices families engaged in while experiencing homelessness, the stories they told about their transition in and out of the shelter, and how their life, literacy, and schooling histories shaped their beliefs about the future. The methodology for the study draws from the qualitative research traditions of ethnography³² and portraiture.³³

Portraiture allowed me to recognize shifts in the changing landscape of the lives of the families at the shelter, how their experiences evolved, and how the participants constructed meaning in their lives. I set out to examine the literacy practices of families with high expectations for the strengths I would find and to represent the unique portraits of each of the families. I

27. Mike Rose, *The Mind At Work* (New York: Viking, 2004).

28. Laurie MacGillivray, Amy Lassiter Ardell, and Margaret Saucedo Curwen, "Supporting the Literacy Development of Children Living in Homeless," *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 5 (2010): 384-392.

29. Laurie MacGillivray, Amy Lassiter Ardell, and Margaret Saucedo Curwen, "Libraries, Churches, and Schools: the Literate Lives of Mothers and Children in a Homeless Shelter," *Urban Education* 45, no. 2 (2010): 221-245.

30. Judith Wells Lindfors, *Children's Language* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008).

31. Larry Cuban, *The Blackboard and the Bottom Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

32. Bonnie S. Sunstein and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater, *Fieldworking* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007).

33. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and Jessica Hoffmann Davis, *The Art and Science of Portraiture* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997).

developed counterportraits,³⁴ derived from portraiture, to do the political work of exposing and critiquing the narrow views of homelessness portrayed in official portraits such as statistics and official documents, including the unexamined assumptions and deficit myths surrounding people living in poverty.³⁵ Developing counterportraits of families experiencing homelessness includes the circumstances, interests, strengths, and needs of individual families as well as the larger contexts that shape them. The counterportraits call on the listener or reader to take up the perspectives of families experiencing homelessness that are often silenced by official portraits.

Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews with parents, fieldnotes from the family art and story hour, and document analysis. Semi-structured interviews with individual parents were conducted at the shelter outside of the family art and story hour and ranged from one hour to ninety minutes in length. Responses from semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed and coded line by line, allowing me to identify themes and categories central to family literacy practices and patterns of response across parent interviews related to their life, literacy and schooling histories. A codebook was used to record and reflect the major themes and categories that emerged from the coding process.³⁶ I searched for multiple forms of evidence across interview transcripts, literacy artifacts and field notes from the family art and story hour to provide justification and support for identifying initial themes and categories in my tentative interpretations of the data. The analytical tool dialogical narrative analysis³⁷ allowed me to identify stories from parent interviews, what the stories communicated about literacy practices families engaged in, and what the parents believed was possible in their lives.³⁸

My subjectivity as a middle-class white woman, a mother of two young children, a former elementary teacher of many students from underrepresented groups, and my interest in social justice issues influenced the ways I engaged with the families and what I chose to reveal in the research. My role as researcher and literacy sponsor further complicated what I was able to “see” in the space of the shelter. Reflecting on my biases as they emerged in the analysis of data was critical to understanding why particular stories and pieces of the data were more relevant to the aims of the study than others and increased the transparency of the ways I selected, analyzed and disseminated what I learned about the families. I used a double-entry notetaking³⁹ format to record my reactions to my observations and raise awareness to shifts in my perspectives, attitudes, and insights influenced by new data.

Participants

Like Brianna’s family, several families voluntarily chose to participate in the family art and story hour which gave parents and children access to art materials, writing tools, puppets, book collections, volunteer reading buddies, library cards, and support with homework and official documents from school. I invited all parents and children who attended to enroll in the study.

34. Richard J. Meyer, *Official Portraits and Unofficial Counterportraits of “At Risk” Students* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

35. Randy Bomer, Joel Dworin, Laura May, and Peggy Semingson, “Miseducating Teachers about the Poor: a Critical Analysis of Ruby Payne’s Claims about Poverty,” *The Teachers College Record* 110, no. 12 (2008): 2497-2531.

36. Corrine Glesne, *Becoming Qualitative Researchers* (Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon, 2006).

37. Arthur Frank, “Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis” in *Varieties Of Narrative Analysis*, ed. J.A. Holstein and J.F. Gubrium (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).

38. Arthur Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

39. Sunstein and Chiseri-Strater, *Fieldworking*.

By virtue of their participation in a literacy program, I assumed that the five mothers and one father who consented to be part of the study valued literacy. Four boys and eight girls, whose ages ranged from 4 to 13, enrolled in the study with their parents. Five parents self-identified as Black or African American and one mother identified herself as Puerto Rican. After losing her job and her home in Chicago's inner city, Shana moved to College Town with her two school-aged daughters Mia (11) and Rhoda (9) to start anew. William & Julissa left Gary, Indiana to provide a safer environment and better schools for their three young children, Lawrence (6), Darius (4), and baby Ezme (7 months). The loss of her children's father caused emotional and economic constraints that led Kendra to move her two daughters, Mariah (10) and Makayla (6) from Chicago to College Town. Melody never intended to stay at the shelter when she moved to College Town, but when she arrived with her three children from an inner city neighborhood of Chicago, problems with her Section 8 housing voucher disrupted her transition to a new home. Melody too wanted better schools and safer streets for her sons, Martez (11) and Dylen (4), and her daughter, Alex (9). Like Brianna's family, all of the families in the study moved from inner city neighborhoods to College Town in search of a better life. Despite their interest in literacy and education, the parents and their children are representative of groups from urban areas who are linguistically and culturally diverse, have been historically underserved in schools, and disproportionately struggle with low achievement in school.⁴⁰

Family Literacy Practices

According to my observations, literacy practices were prevalent in the lives of the families at the shelter. During my weekly visits, I found literacy artifacts such as post-it notes shared between parent and child, changing displays of favorite books, scripts for plays, score keeping records, artwork and writing scattered about the children's room at the shelter. Additionally, the chalkboard in the children's room was often embellished with the intentional scribbles of a toddler at the bottom and the writing routines of an older child who aspired to play "teacher" toward the top. Religious literacy practices and texts were also significant in the lives of some of the families as they participated in church communities outside the shelter.

All parents were burdened with the bureaucratic texts associated with social programs. The literacy practices people choose to use and are coerced to use do not always provide solutions to problems or fulfillment of goals.⁴¹ Forms of literacy can also subject people experiencing homelessness to delays best illustrated in a constant cycle of applications, refusals and red tape.⁴² For many of the parents in the study, the number of official forms they were required to fill out in order to gain access to housing, jobs, healthcare, and childcare occupied much of their time. In some ways, my literacy sponsorship at the shelter, allowed for parents to have additional time to address the official documents of homelessness while their children were in my care.

Many of the literacy practices families engaged in were consistent with what is expected of middle class families from schools. Despite their attempts to engage in literacies most valued by school, the parents and children in the study were marginalized by their position in a largely middle class and upper middle class community that wrestles with its own housing policies

40. Gloria Ladson-Billings, "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in US Schools," *Educational Researcher* 35, no.7 (2006): 3-12.

41. Brandt, *Literacy In American Lives*.

42. Taylor, *Toxic Literacies*.

which enact defacto segregation and reinforce lowered expectations for children of color from low-income areas and the schools that serve them.⁴³

Context

The College Town website boasts a population of “well-educated and highly-productive workers” (citation withheld to preserve confidentiality) and a thriving economy fueled by the university, the city’s largest employer. The city is routinely ranked for its livability, education, safety, health, and economic viability. Absent from this portrait is the large population of people experiencing homelessness in College Town, particularly the people who seek refuge on the city’s downtown plaza. The local Public Housing Authority of College Town administers housing vouchers for 81 public housing units.⁴⁴ Many people are waitlisted for the city’s public housing units as affordable housing is limited in the city. The majority of people on the wait list are families with children or individuals with disabilities. Location of affordable housing throughout College Town has been a hot topic to limit the concentration of poverty in areas of the city, particularly as it relates to enrollment at public elementary schools. Community opposition to property rezoning reflected in NIMBY attitudes as well as high land prices and restrictive covenants in many subdivisions that limit construction to single-family residential dwellings, prevent construction of multifamily or transitional housing rental properties throughout College Town. These issues and policies limit affordable rental options for families transitioning from the shelter leading to economically segregated areas of the city. People of color are increasingly spatially concentrated in these areas of College Town. While there have been attempts in College Town to plan housing development aligned with school district goals for development, affordable housing continues to be an issue in areas where new schools are built. Additionally, homelessness in the downtown pedestrian area of College Town has become a growing concern leading to the city council’s adoption of an ordinance that prohibits panhandling, sitting and lying in flowerbeds, and sleeping on public benches. Limited affordable housing in the community leads to chronic homelessness for some people. The city is beginning to engage in strategies such as Rapid Re-housing⁴⁵ to address the limited affordable housing for residents experiencing homelessness that leads to overcrowded shelters turning people away. This step is essential to preventing rather than criminalizing chronic homelessness in College Town.

Counterportraits: Assimilation and Resistance in the Quest for a Better Life

Though the reasons for homelessness among the families were diverse, the stories parents told were joined in unison by a common “quest narrative”⁴⁶ suggesting the families did not believe their lives were “finalized”, but could change for the better.⁴⁷ Resonate in these stories are narratives of assimilation to the middle class ideal and resistance to the deficit perspectives that surrounded them as families experiencing homelessness and people of color from inner city

43. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America* (Chicago, Ill.: Haymarket Books, 2011).

44. Information from a 2014 public policy document outlining impediments to fair housing choice in the city. Citation withheld to protect anonymity.

45. National Alliance to End Homelessness, “Rapid Rehousing,” accessed October 24, 2014, <http://www.endhomelessness.org/pages/overview-rapid-re-housing>.

46. Arthur Frank, *The Wounded Storyteller* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

47. Frank, “Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis.”

neighborhoods. The “quest narrative” was most recognizable in the stories of the parents as it suggested that their ongoing struggle was part of what made their efforts worth taking, for their children, for themselves, for the promise of a better life. Central to this quest, as illustrated in the following partial counterportraits, is a quality education.

All parents saw themselves as teachers in the lives of their children. While they deferred to official school records to define the achievement of their children, they exercised agency in their beliefs that their children could learn and would learn at school and outside of school despite whatever struggles might exist. Some parents also questioned the school’s approach to literacy sponsorship, through a resistance narrative, especially if they were concerned for their children’s progress or recognized strengths in their children that were undervalued in school.

Parents didn’t depend solely on the teacher’s judgment of their child’s needs or progress as expressed in their attitudes about homework or in their views on what their children could learn at home. In some instances, parents worked to respect the views of the teacher, but challenged the school’s literacy sponsorship when their perspectives differed. At other times, parents expressed doubt about their child’s progress as they deferred to the perspectives of the school.

Shana questioned some of the ways the school defined her daughter Rhoda’s difficulty with reading and how she learned best. She was willing to cooperate, plan and support the literacy sponsorship at school, but she also strongly believed that there was more than one way to learn how to read and some ways worked better than others for any particular person. When Shana purchased *Hooked on Phonics*⁴⁸ for Rhoda following a teacher’s suggestion, she came to the conclusion that the reading program wasn’t for everyone when it didn’t help. In this story, Shana described Rhoda’s early struggles with reading:

...she would make you think that she knew how to read and that she knew how to write because you would read a story to her and you would tell her to read the story back to you out of the same book but she wasn't actually reading the story, she memorized it...so she used to ask me, "Mom, how do you spell 'and'," and I tell her to point it out to me in the book and she couldn't point it out to me. If she reading it in the sentence, she remembers it's in the sentence because that's what you read to her, but when it came time for her to show you what she actually knew, she couldn't.

Shana’s observations of Rhoda as a young reader illustrate her attention to her daughter’s developing understanding of the reading process. When I asked her what makes Rhoda a good reader now, she explained:

Anybody who...knows how to read but still understand that you don't know every word. Because there's new words every day...I don't know every word. So if you ask for help...if you ask someone you know "what does this mean? how do you pronounce this?"...there's a lot of words out here that's more professional and then you have the Ebonics of words, then you have the words in between. You need to know all those words because a majority of them mean the same thing it's just you say them a different way.

Shana’s perspective is consistent with sociolinguistic theory related to flexible language practices such as code-switching.⁴⁹ In school, academic discourse is far more privileged than the

48. *Hooked on Phonics*, accessed October 24, 2014, <https://www.hookedonphonics.com>.

49. Heath, *Ways With Words*.

vernacular varieties of language from home, particularly homes of underrepresented children whose primary discourse does not closely match with the academic language of school.⁵⁰ Shana realized that it is important for her daughters to use language flexibly acknowledging the hierarchy of power associated with language use and word choice in an increasingly competitive school and work environment.⁵¹

Kendra questioned the ways official school report cards described her daughter Mariah as a reader:

K: ...just because she's a slow reader, don't mean she is not a magnificent-she is a magnificent reader. Because she comprehends. The whole thing about reading is comprehending what you're reading. If you can comprehend what you're reading it doesn't matter how fast you read it or how slow you read it, as long as you comprehend. It might take you longer, but you know what you just read.

The confidence Kendra asserted in talking about Mariah as a reader revealed her willingness to entertain an alternative explanation for Mariah's reading achievement scores. Her resistance narrative of her daughter as a reader placed deficits within the school's literacy sponsorship rather than deficits inherent in her daughter's ability to read. Kendra's observation of Mariah's strengths as a reader illuminate her willingness to contest deficits defined by the official texts of school. Observations such as the one Kendra made here about Mariah are critical to how Mariah will view herself as a reader despite the challenges she faces in school. Her mother's insight into Mariah's reading process will provide a buffer, though potentially not great enough to combat failure on high stakes reading measures in school based on an autonomous model.⁵²

Literacy sponsorship in schools extended beyond reading to language use. Julissa shared that her oldest son, Lawrence, had a teacher in Gary, Indiana who advised her to speak English only with her children. The following story illustrates Julissa's willingness to question the teacher's advice based on her own history as a bilingual student:

J: I was talking to my son's teacher and she said it's harder on their brains because the teacher was saying that um...something about a part in the brain-

M: -Who told? What? Where?

J: The teacher named Ms. Smith in Gary. And she said it was hard for them to learn both so I started like teaching them my way...like I showed them something like this is this in Spanish and this in English and then make them repeat it and then hide it and then come back minutes later or an hour later and say what's this and they started learning it.

Julissa's experience moving from Puerto Rico to the U.S. as a young child influenced her desire for her children to learn both English and Spanish. Once they were settled in their new home, Julissa planned to use post-it notes to label things in the apartment in English and Spanish, not unlike the practice of many early childhood classroom teachers. Julissa said she'd seen many job

50. Gee, *Situated Language And Learning*.

51. James Paul Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies* (London: Routledge, 2008).

52. Street, "The New Literacy Studies."

postings online that paid more if the applicant was bilingual. She saw an important link between her children's potential to be bilingual and their future job prospects.⁵³

Both resistance and assimilation were part of her quest to teach her children Spanish. Bilingualism, though in this case deemed a disruptive force⁵⁴ in Lawrence's education, is widely valued and accessible to middle class families who can afford to pay for private tutors or attend schools where second language acquisition is a priority.⁵⁵

In addition to being cautioned about speaking Spanish with Lawrence, Julissa showed me that her six-year old son also had an Individualized Education Plan for speech and language. Language development was a concern shared by Julissa and Melody influenced by conversations with teachers in schools. Melody expressed doubt about her youngest son Dylen's speech during an interview with me:

M: Yes, because certain letters he can't pronounce it right. I don't know what it is, but it's having an effect on putting letters to make a word, even with his alphabet, when he says his alphabet, even certain letters he says different. So when you try...for a long time...what is it? Like, now we've been working on BAT.

D: BAT.

M: And he wasn't saying the T. He was saying BA.

D: B (letter name)-A (letter name)-C?

Melody became concerned with Dylen's speech after teachers in his pre-K program suggested that his speech should improve. Like Lawrence, William and Julissa's oldest son, I wondered if Dylen's cultural and linguistic background influenced the perspectives of the teachers who had decided that he had a speech problem so early in his schooling because they did not understand the legitimacy of the language structures he already possessed.⁵⁶ In both cases, the literacy sponsorship extended to the parents and children at school may have been based on a cultural deficit framework rather than one that understands the complexity of language and secondary discourses.⁵⁷ Children from underrepresented groups who are linguistically diverse and employ dialects and languages that differ from the dominant standard English are often perceived as deficient in language skills. Lowered teacher expectations based on deficit perspectives of "non-standard" forms of English fail to understand and build upon what students know as well as limit the opportunities they have to use this knowledge to acquire the standard ascribed value by the academy; the language of political and economic power.⁵⁸ In this case, not only are Lawrence and Dylen perceived as deficient in their language development, but the language strengths they do possess are not utilized to provide a more meaningful and equitable experience in school.⁵⁹

All of the parents in the study demonstrated high expectations for the education of their children. Shana was concerned with the discriminatory practices related to the voucher system and the push to label schools and privatize education in her former community:

53. Lipman, *The New Political Economy Of Urban Education*.

54. Sonia Nieto, *Language, Culture and Teaching: Critical Perspectives* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010).

55. Samina Hadi-Tabassum, *Language, Space, and Power: A Critical Look at Bilingual Education* (UK: Multilingual Matters, Ltd., 2006).

56. William Labov, *Language in the Inner City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972).

57. Gee, *Social Linguistics and Literacies*.

58. Lisa Delpit, *Other People's Children 1st Edition* (New York: New Press, 1995).

59. Courtney B. Cazden, *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001).

...they don't want bad kids quote unquote to go to these schools so they started doing this test where the kid got a score of a certain amount to be able to go to this school. So underprivileged kids, if their parents are not spending the time with them and teaching them and they're relying on the teacher to teach them, they would never be able to learn everything...they place the great—you know the really good teachers in the schools where you have to take the test and they tell you to take the test but that's because they know you're not going to get in there because where you living...where you from...

Shana's concern over the privatization of public education demonstrates the value she places on learning versus the competition that characterizes the admission requirements and voucher restrictions for charter schools supported by neoliberal education policy that increasingly privatizes education for profit rather than addressing disparities in the public system.⁶⁰

Conversely, Melody, made many attempts to keep her kids out of the public schools in her Chicago neighborhood. She viewed the charter system as a better opportunity for them to get out of their "typical" neighborhood environment:

But what made me go charter was the public schools in the area I was in, it's the typical neighborhood kids. So it's like instantly, if you're in the neighborhood, they put you in your neighborhood school. The really wild bunch goes to the neighborhood school. And then if you have the opportunity to go to a charter school or a private school, it's a good thing. One because you're out of your environment, two because the school, like I said the school they attended would teach them a grade ahead so they're being taught in advance, three the atmosphere of being in a private school, even though it was charter, where a lot of neighborhood schools you did wear the basic clothing because of gang...whatever. But the private school...I've always felt like it makes a child feel different, think different.

Melody's portrayal of an inner city public school illustrates the pull for parents to abandon their neighborhood schools in hopes for a better opportunity for their children. She also clearly felt her children needed to be protected from the activities of the neighborhood. In this portrayal Melody did not question the prevalence of the dispossession and displacement of African American and Latino/as in U.S. cities, economic segregation, poverty and violence in the inner city exacerbated by neoliberal policies.⁶¹ Instead in her quest to make sure her children attended "good schools," Melody took up a perspective that sustains the historical struggle for racial equality within a post-racial political discourse in the U.S., a perspective that works against her and her children.⁶²

Even after she moved to College Town to give her children a "slower pace of life," Melody had strong opinions about the schools in her new community. After transitioning from the shelter, she and her children walked long distances to remain at Lighthouse, the school where children residing at the shelter were bussed, even though there was a school just a half block from her house:

Lighthouse is away from where I live at because their neighborhood school is Washington and that's the neighborhood school for "I'm on the side of the lower class or the bad

60. Diane Ravitch, *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

61. Lipman, *The New Political Economy Of Urban Education*.

62. Lisa D. Delpit, *Multiplication is for White People* (New York: New Press, 2012).

area or the stereotyping of what side of town you're on." Instantly it's like, even when I go to the park, I don't want that for them. I just left this. I see it. If I wanted this I would have stayed where I was. So I do, they do, go out of their way to go to Lighthouse and that's because I want them to be in better education, better environment, better teachers, better staff, better principal.

Melody's story illustrates both a resistance narrative to what she saw in her new neighborhood and an assimilation narrative in her attempts to privilege a school community much farther away that only differed in the ethnic and class backgrounds of the children, not the qualifications of the teachers or principal. Her own schooling history shaped what she believed was possible in a school setting where economic segregation coupled with a high percentage of students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds meant in terms of access and opportunity.⁶³

Of all the participating families, only Melody's two oldest children remained at Lighthouse after transitioning from the shelter because they were willing to walk for almost two miles across a busy highway to school. After three months in the shelter, Julissa and William were unable to obtain stable housing in College Town and were forced to return to Gary, Indiana in order to use their Section 8 housing voucher. After an extended wait for housing in College Town and pressure from extended family, Brianna's family returned to Chicago to live in her grandmother's one-bedroom apartment while her mother looked for a job that could provide enough for the family of four to get their own place. Kendra and Shana both moved their families to a nearby community where housing was more affordable than in College Town.

Conclusion

Through the act of storytelling parents saw themselves as teachers, learners, role models and advocates for their children. The parents attempted to sustain a narrative of improving their lives for their families (the quest to do better) through assimilation narratives on middle class life opportunities and literacies and resistance narratives to distance themselves from deficit discourses surrounding their linguistic, cultural, and class backgrounds. Better schools, safer streets, and secure housing were the possibilities the parents imagined, illustrated in stories of life in their former neighborhoods and the hope a new community could offer them and their children.

Although parents did not always challenge the school perspective, the counterportraits represented partially in this article illustrate the ways parents were willing to collaborate and take seriously advice from teachers and adopt literacy practices sanctioned by schools. Parents also were willing to assume responsibility for guiding their children's development outside of school and consider whether they needed to do more to confront potential problems with learning in school. Despite these attempts to engage in literacy practices most closely associated with middle class ways of knowing, parents repeatedly suffered setbacks in employment, affordable child-care, transportation to and from jobs and school, and stable housing which made it difficult for some of the families to stay in the same school community, or to remain in College Town after they transitioned from the shelter.

Economic struggle seems to be entangled with epistemic struggle.⁶⁴ In order to counter deficit ideologies, it is necessary to question the association between literacy and affluence har-

63. Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2005).

64. Gerald Campano, *Immigrant Students and Literacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2007).

bored in our dominant narrative about school achievement and social class⁶⁵ and to contest the social and educational reform policies that sustain this narrative.⁶⁶ By examining the stories of people whose everyday lives and literacies are largely underrepresented and misunderstood in schools we can begin to compose a more inclusive portrait of homelessness. In the context of College Town, the tendency to adopt deficit perspectives concerning the children and families displaced from Chicago's inner city makes it unlikely that both the value families ascribe to education and the literacy practices families engage in will be recognized in schools. Rejecting a "culture of poverty" framework⁶⁷ by attempting to understand a child's sociocultural knowledge and the literacies families engage in for social and cultural purposes,⁶⁸ can provide more powerful connections to school curricula,⁶⁹ support culturally responsive pedagogy⁷⁰ and engage students in school experiences that address the social realities and injustices their families, neighborhoods, and communities face.⁷¹ Additionally, shifting from deficit discourse to conversations regarding deep inequities in the U.S. may support more just explanations for school failure linked to poverty in terms of access and opportunity rather than ability or merit.⁷²

Within this perspective of valuing the sociocultural knowledge of all families it is critical to understand the role of differential access to the economic, political, and social securities of a steady and living wage, healthy and secure homes, safe neighborhoods, and high quality public education. Dismissing the disparities evident in the lives of families experiencing homelessness reinforces deficit perspectives of what it means to be homeless⁷³ and undermines the quest for a better life families are working toward. Literacy sponsorship, teaching practices, and advocacy in and out of school shape attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions about inclusion of youth experiencing homelessness in communities as much as the housing policies and local ordinances that increasingly criminalize homelessness. Providing opportunities for families experiencing homelessness to participate more fully in school communities by engaging in teaching and advocacy that supports meaningful and collaborative efforts to provide literacy sponsorship pushes back against neoliberal policies that disguise differential access as differences in "grit" or "merit."⁷⁴ Contesting the discourses of a supposed U.S. meritocracy by challenging exclusionary practices such as emphasis on high-stakes testing, corporate takeover of schools, and underfunded public schools and early childhood education programs, validates the lives of children and their families whose efforts often go unrewarded in their quest for the "American Dream." The self-determination of the families illustrated in these partial counterportraits is a collective of voices that challenge the dominant deficit perspectives surrounding homelessness, particularly in schools. These counterportraits "talk back to"⁷⁵ the discourses and policies that work politically to finalize their margin-

65. Jean Anyon, "Social Class and School Knowledge," *Curriculum Inquiry* 11, no. 1 (1981): 3-42.

66. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

67. Bomer et al., "Miseducating Teachers About the Poor."

68. Street, "The New Literacy Studies."

69. Jabari Mahiri, *Shooting for Excellence: African American and Youth Culture in New Century Schools* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1998).

70. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994).

71. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

72. Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*.

73. Paul C. Gorski, "Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework," *Equity & Excellence in Education* 41, no. 1 (2008): 130-148.

74. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, "Broken Promises: School Reform in Retrospect" in *Foundations of Education* (ed.) Susan F. Semel (New York: Routledge, 2010).

75. bell hooks, *Talking back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1989).

alized position in society rather than to imagine and make possible transformative opportunities in which families experiencing homelessness can secure a better future.

Bibliography

- Anyon, Jean. "Social Class and School Knowledge." *Curriculum Inquiry* 11, no. 1 (1981): 3-42.
- Auerbach, Elsa Roberts. "Toward a Social-Contextual Approach to Family Literacy." *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 2 (1989): 165-182.
- Barton, David, and Mary Hamilton. *Local Literacies*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Bomer, Randy, Joel Dworin, Laura May, and Peggy Semingson. "Miseducating Teachers about the Poor: a Critical Analysis of Ruby Payne's Claims about Poverty." *The Teachers College Record* 110, no. 12 (2008): 2497-2531.
- Bowles, Samuel and Herbert Gintis. "Broken Promises: School Reform in Retrospect." In *Foundations of Education*. Ed. Susan F. Semel. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- . *Schooling in Capitalist America*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2011.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- Campano, Gerald. *Immigrant Students and Literacy*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2007.
- Cazden, Courtney B. *Classroom Discourse: the Language of Teaching and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.
- Chiseri-Strater, Elizabeth, and Bonnie S Sunstein. *Fieldworking*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1997.
- Compton-Lilly, Catherine, Rebecca Rogers, and Tisha Y Lewis. "Analyzing Epistemological Considerations Related to Diversity: an Integrative Critical Literature Review of Family Literacy Scholarship." *Reading Research Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (2012): 33-60.
- Cuban, Larry. *The Blackboard and the Bottom Line*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Delpit, Lisa D. *Other People's Children*. New York: New Press, 1995.
- . *Multiplication is for White People*. New York: New Press, 2012.
- Dudley-Marling, Curt. "Home-School Literacy Connections: The Perceptions of African American and Immigrant ESL Parents in Two Urban Communities." *The Teachers College Record* 111, no. 7 (2009): 1713-1752.
- Frank, Arthur. "Practicing Dialogical Narrative Analysis." In *Varieties of Narrative Analysis*, edited by J.A. Holstein and J.F. Gubrium, 33-52. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2012.
- . *The Wounded Storyteller*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- . *Letting Stories Breathe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy Of The Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 2000.
- Gee, James Paul. *Situated Language And Learning*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- . *Social Linguistics And Literacies*. London: Routledge, 2008.
- Glesne, Corrine. *Becoming Qualitative Researchers*. Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon, 2006.
- Gorski, Paul C. "Peddling Poverty for Profit: Elements of Oppression in Ruby Payne's Framework." *Equity & Excellence in Education* 41, no. 1 (2008): 130-148.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Hicks, Deborah. *Reading Lives*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2002.
- hooks, bell. *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1989.

- Kotlowitz, Alex. *The Interrupters*. On-line Documentary. Directed by Steve James. 2011. Chicago: Kartemquin Films. Accessed August 7, 2014 <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/interrupters>.
- Kozol, Jonathan. *The Shame of The Nation*. New York: Crown Publishers, 2005.
- Labov, William. *Language in The Inner City*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972.
- Ladson-Billings, Gloria. *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- . "From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding Achievement in US Schools." *Educational Researcher* 35, no. 7 (2006): 3-12.
- Lareau, Annette. *Unequal Childhoods*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Lawrence-Lightfoot, Sara, and Jessica Hoffmann Davis. *The Art and Science of Portraiture*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.
- Lindfors, Judith Wells. *Children's Language*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2008.
- Lipman, Pauline. *The New Political Economy Of Urban Education*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- MacGillivray, Laurie, Amy Lassiter Ardell, and Margaret Saucedo Curwen. "Supporting the Literacy Development of Children Living in Homeless Shelters." *The Reading Teacher* 63, no. 5 (2010): 384-392.
- . "Libraries, Churches, and Schools: the Literate Lives of Mothers and Children in a Homeless Shelter." *Urban Education* 45, no. 2 (2010): 221-245.
- Mahiri, Jabari. *Shooting for Excellence*. Urbana, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1998.
- Meyer, Richard J. *Official Portraits and Unofficial Counterportraits of 'At Risk' Students*. New York: Routledge, 2010.
- Meyer, Richard J, and Kathryn F Whitmore. *Reclaiming Reading*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Ng, Jennifer, and John Rury. "Poverty and Education: a Critical Analysis of the Ruby Payne Phenomenon." *The Teachers College Record*. ID 12596 (2006). Accessed July 24, 2014, <http://www.tcrecord.org>
- Ravitch, Diane. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System*. New York: Basic Books, 2010.
- Rogers, Rebecca. "Between Contexts: a Critical Discourse Analysis of Family Literacy, Discursive Practices and Literate Subjectivities." *Reading Research Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2002): 248-277.
- Rose, Mike. *The Mind at Work*. New York: Viking, 2004.
- Smith, Debbie, and Kathryn F Whitmore. *Literacy and Advocacy in Adolescent Family, Gang, School, and Juvenile Court Communities*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006.
- Smith, Frank. "Overselling Literacy." *Phi Delta Kappan* 70, no. 5 (1989): 352-59.
- Street, Brian. "Family Literacy and the Politics of Literacy." In *Many Families, Many Literacies: an International Declaration of Principles* edited by Denny Taylor, 207-210. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.
- . "The New Literacy Studies." In *Literacy: a Critical Sourcebook*, edited by E.L. Cushman, E.R. Kintgen, B.M. Kroll, and M. Rose, 430-442. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2001.
- Sunstein, Bonnie S, and Elizabeth Chiseri-Strater. *Fieldworking*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2007.

Taylor, Denny. *Toxic Literacies*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1996.

Taylor, Denny, and Catherine Dorsey-Gaines. *Growing up Literate*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1988.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. "The 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) To Congress," 2013: 1-64. Accessed June 3, 2014, <https://www.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/ahar-2013-part1.pdf>.

Weiner, Eric J. "Keeping Adults Behind: Adult Literacy Education in the Age of Official Reading Regimes." *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 49, no. 4 (2005): 286-301.

Wilkinson, Richard G, and Kate Pickett. *The Spirit Level*. London: Penguin Books, 2010.

Mary M. Jacobs is an Assistant Professor of Education at Cornell College in Mount Vernon, IA. Jacobs taught in elementary schools for fifteen years in the roles of classroom teacher, literacy coach, and Title I reading teacher. Her current research interests include the intersection of time, agency, and identity in teaching and learning contexts, the literacy practices of culturally and linguistically diverse learners underrepresented in schools, and the relationship between literacy, power, and inequality. Jacobs continues her work at a transitional shelter through civic engagement with her students intended to support children and families in transition and to broaden pre-service teachers' perspectives on homelessness.