

School-Age Homeless Children

Crucial Transporters of Literacy Activities in the Shelter

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Abstract

While research on emergent literacy development provides a comprehensive picture of the factors that are conducive to children's early literacy development, environments of young preschool children living in overnight and residential shelters have not been investigated from an emergent literacy perspective. Results of my comprehensive study on the emergent literacy development of children living at a homeless shelter, uncovered the role of older school-age children (among other factors) in providing unique opportunities for younger children's literacy interactions. This article aims to describe these children's activities in detail in an attempt to promote further research and discussion in the area of homeless children's educational and literacy development.

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Research on literacy development of children has provided educators and policymakers with evidence on the importance of facilitating literacy during early years of child development. By investigating the life circumstances of successful young readers in environments of affluence and poverty, researchers have identified factors that are conducive to children's early literacy development. However, a void exists in this extensive research. Environments of young preschool children living in overnight and residential shelters have not been investigated from an emergent literacy perspective and thus the broad question of how these environments influence these children's literacy remains unanswered.

Since education is considered to be the key to breaking the cycle of homelessness (Bassuk, 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 examine literacy development of young homeless children.

The purpose of my study was to understand the ways in which shelter life influenced the literacy development of young children. My study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. What was the nature of shelter living for children and mothers at the shelter?
2. How did the families' activities influence the literacy development of their children?
3. What were the characteristics of the shelter environment that influenced the literacy development of children?

In this paper however, I will primarily focus on the results related to one of the characteristics of the shelter environment that influenced the literacy development of children. This was the role of school-age children in the lives of the younger children. This was a very significant finding because of its implications for providing the much needed services to all children at the shelter.

The research on emergent literacy has provided us with insight into the social nature of literacy development. Regarding the emergent literacy development, research shows 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). Implicit in this research is notion that social interaction is crucial for the emergent literacy development of young children (Slaughter-Defoe, 1992). One way in which parents in past studies were able to engage their children in meaningful literacy interactions was through shared book reading. 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 (Mason & Kerr, 1992; Morrow, 1989; Strickland & Morrow, 1989; Taylor, 1983; Sulzby, 1985; Teale, 1995). The results of the Norman-Jackson (1982) study showed that low-income African-American children who were successful readers were different from low-income African-American children who were unsuccessful readers not because of the verbal interactions with their parents, but because of the amount of interactions with the older siblings.

The interaction involved in shared book reading also improves the educational outcomes for young children (Heath, 1983; IRA & NAEYC, 1998; Taylor, 1983; Strickland, 1989) and it provides attachment security in becoming literate (Bus & Ijzendoorn, 1995). In fact "no other single activity is regarded as important as the shared experience between caregivers and children" (Neuman, 1999, p. 286).

My study provided an initial framework for studying the shelter environments with respect to literacy.

Method

Research Context

In this study I utilized the qualitative case study methodology to understand the emergent literacy development of children at a residential homeless shelter. Case study research is one type of qualitative research, and it shares basic assumptions about the construction of knowledge with other types of qualitative research. Qualitative research is an umbrella concept which covers several forms of "inquiry that help us understand and explain the meaning of social phenomena with as little disruption of the natural setting as possible" (Merriam, 1998, p. 5). The key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research is based is the "view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social world" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Thus, the qualitative researcher is interested in gaining insight into the meanings that "people have

constructed" (p. 6). It "implies a direct concern with experiences as they are 'lived' or 'felt' or 'undergone'" (Sherman and Webb, 1988, p. 7).

Another attractive feature of qualitative research is that it can be used to describe a process. That is, it can show "how all the parts work together to form a whole" (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). Finally, in the search for knowledge and understanding of the human condition, qualitative researchers "perceive what is happening in key episodes or testimonies, represent happenings with their own direct interpretation and stories (i.e. narratives)" (Stake, 1995, p. 40). The qualitative researcher utilizes these narratives to "optimize the opportunity of the reader to gain an experiential understanding of the case" (Stake, 1995, p. 40).

For my study, the case was a group of residents in a homeless shelter. Within that context I studied the children's emergent literacy development.

My research was conducted at a residential shelter for women and children in a large city in the Midwest. Joseph's (fictional name) residential shelter houses thirty families. Currently the community's unemployment rate is higher than the city-wide average. The median income of a family in this community is among the lowest in the city, and a third of the population lives in poverty. The community is also ranked high in gang murders, rapes, drug and alcohol addiction, and teen pregnancies.

The shelter was ten years old at the time of the study. It was established because the sponsoring agency that consulted in prisons around the country, realized that women had no place to go when they left prison, and they had nowhere to take their children. The shelter was one of the very few places that accepted the women directly from prison. Initially, there were only single women, but by 1991 there were more women with children arriving.

Eight families were participants in this study. They were selected on the basis of their willingness to be in the study and if they had young children. I also included families with older children if they were interacting with the younger children in the study. Since the duration of their stay was uncertain, I started interviewing as soon I met a family who had young children. These families stayed at the shelter between one to twenty-four weeks. For some, this was the first shelter in which they had resided; for others it was their second or third. I explained to all of participants, their rights regarding the study and they gave verbal or written consent if they chose to participate. Some of the families did not want to sign the consent form because they were uncomfortable signing documents. However, they willingly consented on the tape during the interviews. The children whom I focused on were of ages 3 to 12.

Families in my study were housed in whichever dorms had space. Some dorms had a number of young children and a few older school-age children, and others had no children at all. There was a small playground outside the shelter with a slide set and a playhouse.

In describing the families, I have changed the names of the mothers and their children, and information pertaining to the exact dates of their stay, so that their anonymity is maintained. The shelter administration kept dates of entry and exit, and this information could be used to identify the families described in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection procedures for my study included direct observations, structured and open-ended interviews techniques as well as collection of literacy-related documents at the shelter and at the Head Start program. The duration of data collection was six months. I decided on the six-month time frame because the shelter traditionally limited families' stay to four months, but in some circumstances extended it for a longer period.

In this study, it was not possible to collect equal amounts of data due to families' differing lengths of stay at the shelter. During the course of six months, I observed the young children, the older school-age children, the parents, the teachers, shelter and classroom dynamics, and the young children's interaction with all these different individuals in different settings over the course of six-months.

During the first few days of data collection, I observed a variety of activities to gain an understanding of daily shelter routines of the children and the other residents. I noted that there was a set of schedules of activities as well as a relatively predictable set of activities on the part of the mothers and their children. At the start of the study there were only two families with preschool-aged children. I shadowed two children for two days from breakfast to dinner to get a sense of their daily routines. Since Ellen (five-years old) and Grace (five-years old) were in two separate dorms, I followed Ellen one day and Grace the other. I noted down the names of people they interacted with and the type and duration of each activity. Also, for one week I observed the shelter routines in general to understand what structured activities were designed for the residents to participate in. The first week of observation revealed that there were two or less structured programs that the residents attended daily, aside from breakfast, lunch and dinner. While Ellen stayed at the shelter for sixteen weeks, Grace only stayed for three weeks.

The day started off with the older school-age children and a few mothers getting ready for school or work. Some of the mothers accompanied their children to their schools since school buses did not arrive at the shelter. While these children and their mothers were gone, the preschool children (who did not attend the Head Start) were babysat by other residents and they occupied themselves by playing with their toys or by staying in their beds until lunch. Those preschool children who attended the shelter Head Start began getting ready by 10:00 a.m. Both the preschoolers and the older school-age children arrived back at the shelter by 3:00 p.m. The shelter then bustled with activity.

As new families with preschooler arrived at the shelter, I observed them during the day. Some families did not enroll their preschoolers at the Head Start and spent the day away from the shelter.

Thus, I developed an understanding of the routines at the shelter. I planned my observations such as to optimize my time at the shelter. I visited from 11:00 a.m. to sometimes 8:00 p.m. I observed the preschoolers (Ellen and Grace) as they prepared to go to the Head Start and followed them to the Head Start. These interactions took place between 3:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m.

After each observation, I typed my notes in the form of chronological narratives. Each transcript

was analyzed and compared to the previous ones to clarify or complement the findings in addition to identifying foci for subsequent observations.

For the purposes of my study, formal, open-ended interviews were initially conducted in two areas: (1) Family background and experiences with homelessness and (2) Children's literacy development prior to coming to the shelter. The family background interviews were structured to put the mother at ease and to provide similar data from all families.

The goal of the interviews on family background and experiences with homelessness was to get a picture of the family background, schooling, employment experiences, support services, shelter living, and future goals. After I had been at the shelter for one month, I began interviewing. The goal of the questions pertaining to the children's literacy development prior to coming to the shelter, was to obtain information regarding past literacy practices of the mothers and their children, particularly in their daily routines.

I made every attempt to understand the ways in which the children at the shelter used print. Thus, I kept an inventory of printed material in each dorm throughout the study. Furthermore, I collected samples of printed materials from the children and the families. On a few occasions, the children offered their writings to me as a gift. I also obtained copies of the shelter rules and materials from the shelter programs.

The most challenging part of this study was constantly balancing my level of involvement with the women and children at the shelter with my role as a researcher. From the time I entered the shelter, I felt attached to the children.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began on the first day of the study and continued throughout the study. Throughout the period of my data collection, I read and reread the gathered data to locate concepts that would provide direction for further data collection. In addition to this, I compiled reflective notes in the margins of my field notes. As this data collection and analysis continued, I searched for connections between concepts using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss 1967) of data analysis. "The constant comparative method of data analysis was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as the means of developing grounded theory. A grounded theory consists of categories, properties, and hypotheses that are the conceptual links between and among the categories and properties. Because the basic strategy of the constant comparative method is compatible with the inductive, concept-building orientation of all qualitative research, the constant comparative method of data analysis has been adopted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory" (Merriam, 1998, p. 159).

Using this method, I was able to "move through multiple levels of data, seeking recurring themes that [could] be explored in greater depth" (Taylor & Dorsey-Gaines, 1988, p. 228). This process involved identifying the units (initial words or phrases) that emerged from the field notes, comparing the units to each other, and placing them into themes. I indexed field notes, developing categories from field notes of observations, and also from interview data. Then I rechecked those categories to see if they held up, and as I developed new categories, going back to the earlier field notes. This process ended when I exhausted the categories.

Results

The presence of older school-age children in the shelter dorms provided a unique opportunity for younger children's literacy interactions. Joseph's shelter did offer a variety of programs for shelter residents, but these programs were limited in the way they addressed the educational and emotional needs of both school-age and younger children. These programs included counseling, job training, computer training, health training, community meeting, parenting classes, and the playgroup for children. In addition to these meetings, the residents were also encouraged to schedule time during the day for attending the computer room and making appointments with the social worker.

The Head Start at the shelter was considered by all the families to be an important component of the shelter. It had four classrooms. Two classrooms were for children ages three and four, and two classrooms for children ages five and six. It offered a morning program (9:00 a.m. to 12:00 p.m.) and an afternoon program (12:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.). Although this program was part of the shelter, it also serviced children from the neighborhood and thus provided the children at the shelter some exposure to the surrounding community. It was an important part of this community since it provided the neighborhood children with a safe learning environment. Families at the shelter noted that they did not need to spend money on transportation to send their children elsewhere. It also provided them with the opportunity to work during the day and not spend extra money on babysitting.

Although the families expressed a sense of relief about this facility and started registration paper work upon their arrival into the shelter, during the course of my study only two children from the shelter attended the program. Incomplete or missing immunization records were the primary reason many young children at the shelter could not attend the program. Also, the rate of high transience prevented some of the children from utilizing this program. Furthermore, the two children who attended the program were only there till 3:00 p.m. and spent the rest of the evening and weekends without any structured activities.

It was during these long stretches of unstructured time, the older school-age children stepped in to provide rare learning and play opportunities. These activities were not frequent since there was an unequal ratio of older and younger children in each dorm, and the high transient rates of families in general.

Furthermore, these older children could only initiate these activities if their mothers were getting along with the mothers of the younger children. Children changed from one activity to another sporadically. Isolated literacy actions like young children's individual writing attempts and playing with alphabet flash-cards with each other were not as frequently observed as literacy actions within play activities such as playing house and playing school. In addition, many of the activities were intertwined. For example, children sometimes combined playing school and house. Also, some of the activities were cut short as a result of lunch and dinner schedules.

Most of these school-aged children resided in Dorm 1 and Dorm 4. Thus, most of the interactions around literacy were observed in these two dorms and they were in the context of "playing school."

Although there is nothing unique about children playing school together, what is unique is that this play occurred in a stressful shelter context. Findings from my study mirror past research results in that life for older children at the shelter was overwhelming. It is thus important to understand the overall context of shelter living in order to appreciate the activities that resulted from these interactions. At the shelter the older children took on the sibling role and involved young children who were not related to them.

Boxill's and Beaty's research (1990) revealed that unstructured time for children at the shelter forced "random play among children of widely divergent ages" (p. 55). Also, it is crucial to understand why these older children gave so much attention to the younger children. Vissing (1996) refers to this adult role taken on by the older children as "overcompensation" (p. 81). In her study of homeless children in a rural setting, she discovered that older children nurtured "others whom they perceived as being at risk" (p. 18). This nurturing developed because the children's own parents were busy taking care of their basic survival needs and were emotionally overwhelmed by their condition. Similarly the older children in my study were isolated from their friends and relatives and were placed in situations where they had little control over what happened in their environment.

Results from my study related to the impact of shelter living on the lives of children and their families mirrored the findings of similar research on homelessness. Depression, inability to make friends, and feelings of insecurity were found to be common among children who were homeless (Nunez, 1994). The inability to control their lives led to extreme frustration (Molnar, 1990). Their inability to maintain friendships stemmed from a lack of "security, orderliness, and belonging" (Vissing, 1997, p. 77). Children in these studies (Kozol, 1988; Nunez, 1994; Riblin, 1985; Roseman, 1990; Seltser, 1993; Vissing, 1996; Quint, 1998) were also able to articulate their feelings pertaining to the loss of their homes and loss of stability. In my study, children expressed similar sentiments of loss in terms of loss of possessions, loss of freedom, loss of companionship, feelings of insecurity about being homeless, and lack of privacy. Nine-year-old Hannah described what it was like to be homeless. Hannah wanted to talk and to be heard.

It's okay [to be homeless] as long as you have a roof over your head, and you have clothes to put on your back ... shoes on your feet. It's just like the other people; you just don't have a home. Living here be really hard 'cause we got no home. Some people don't understand because you in here. They get to watch T.V. They got cable and all that. They got caller ID and everything. I like to go outside. But I can't do everything I want to do, like run. I have to be on my best behavior. It seem other kids get to stay up all night, and we, everyday, even on the weekends, we have to go to bed at 8:00 p.m. But some kids stay up all night. Sometimes you want to take a private shower, and people bust in the door because it's not a private bathroom, like you were at home. I need someone to talk to, but you know my mother with the baby. She's trying to help the baby, and she is trying to help me. I try to help my mama. I stick around her. I want to play and stuff.

Although Hannah tried to make sense of her living situation, she was clearly frustrated about staying at the shelter because of the lack of privacy at the shelter, because of her inability to play and be a typical child, because of the loss of material items, and because of her mother's inability to attend to her emotional needs. She concluded by providing the most obvious and the best solution to making life at the shelter easier for her and other people: "Because everybody wants to have their own place. Because people get tired of other people. Can't nothing make nothing better

in here.” In essence what Hannah meant was that people need a home, not a better shelter because “Homes embody the history, memories, and experiences that shape who we are” (Vissing, 1996, p. 79).

While Hannah expressed her frustrations about being homeless by talking to me, Laura (ten-year-old) expressed her frustrations by arguing with Ellen (five-year-old). Ellen was at the shelter for eighteen weeks while Laura stayed for four weeks. Laura and Ellen played together and they also argued constantly. On one occasion Ellen and Laura approached me and started complaining about each other. Daneesha (Ellen’s mother) had told me earlier that the two of them had been fighting all week, and earlier during the day Laura had apparently told Ellen that Ellen was too “hot” and she would get raped. Ellen told Daneesha, and Daneesha had forbidden Ellen to play with Laura. They went to their dorm and continued fighting. Laura was screaming at Ellen.

Laura: *I am sick of you Ellen. You small but you mighty strong enough to make a person wanna cry.*

Ellen: [Turning to me] *She pushed me on the floor.*

Laura: [Screaming louder] *I don't care. I'll do it again if you keep messing with me.*

Ellen: *Do it then! Do it then! Do it then since you is so bad.*

Laura: *Why don't you come up here and mess with me then. Ellen, Hannah didn't even like you. She said, "I don't like Ellen." Everybody tell me that. She tell me that.*

Ellen: *Who?*

Laura: *Everybody telling me that. Grownups don't like you either because you're just a bad little girl. You make them so mad that they gonna take you head and shove it up your butt.*

Laura: *That's all you could say. I heard you.*

Ellen: *And I'm glad you heard me too.*

Laura: *I heard you say the "F" word and the whole word.*

Ellen: *You bad.*

Laura: *I don't care. You can call me that all you want, it don't bother me none.*

Ellen: *But you is one!*

Ellen: *I gonna say nothing.*

Laura: *When you mama here, you don't be saying that 'cause you know she'll smack that teeth out your mouth and that hair off your head and the clothes off your back and the shoes off your feet and the barrettes off your hair.*

[Ellen murmured something and Laura came closer.]

Laura: *Look Ellen, I am sorry. It's just that you get on my nerves sometimes, and there's nothing I can do about that. I can't hit you. I can't beat you up. I can't take off my belt and whip you. I can't do nothing. I'm just defenseless here. And I'm in some dorm that I don't even know about, and you've just been a pest to me. I can't live my life.*

When Laura was not fighting, she tried to create activities (playing with dolls, playing house and playing school) for Ellen in her dorm after she came back from school or during the school breaks. Laura like some other older children provided younger children with meaningful literacy opportunities by taking on the adult role.

One evening after school, Laura and Ellen sat together for almost forty-five minutes playing school. During these forty minutes, Ellen was engaged in reading, writing, and oral recitation. She used Laura's writing instruments and Laura's worksheets from school and received her undivided attention. Laura taught Ellen concepts that were challenging, and praised her several times during this teaching episode. Ellen was an active participant, even though Laura employed a direct instruction approach of teaching isolated facts and specific tasks.

This play session occurred while the girls' mothers on talking terms with each other. Ellen was kneeling at Laura's bed as Laura spread out her worksheets in front of Ellen. The photocopied worksheets from school were from Exploring Mathematics (Scott, Foreman & Company). Laura showed Ellen the worksheet and read the instructions from the page. Laura asked, "Is the broken line a line of symmetry? Write yes or no." She pointed at the different geometrical shapes with a straight line going through the shape. Laura pointed to the first shape and said, "Is this a line of symmetry?" Ellen guessed yes and she was praised. Laura then told her to write "yes" in the shape. Laura wrote "yes" and then asked Ellen to copy it. Laura continued pointing to the rest of the shapes and asked Ellen said "yes" or "no". Sometimes she got the correct answer, and sometimes she gave an incorrect answer. Laura corrected her and told her to put a "y" for yes and an "n" for no.

After they finished the first sheet, they proceeded to the next one. Laura again read out the instructions on the top of the page. "How many lines of symmetry can you find in each figure?" After reading the instructions Laura pointed to the vertexes on the shapes and asked Ellen to count while she pointed her pencil at each vertex on the shape. Ellen counted with 100% accuracy. Laura complimented Ellen and handed her the crayons. The session ended with Ellen summarizing the day's events at the Head Start by telling Laura that she had colored and recited her ABCs. She also told Laura about the lunch menu at the Head Start. The girls continued to play together with their dolls.

During the course of four months, Ellen had the benefit of such interaction only on three occasions (one occasion that I observed and two occasions that Laura told me about). In Ellen's case, the literate person's influence was short-lived because Ellen's parent did not want Ellen to play with Laura. Also, Laura was sent to live with her father out of state.

On a separate occasion I observed for forty minutes, another group of children playing school in the hallway on the second floor of the shelter: Dorian (11), Luanna (10), Sandy (7) and Opal (4). Except for Opal, all of the children were from Dorm 4. Ms. Drake (Dorian and Luanna's mom) and Rina (Sandy's mom) were also watching them. The children were gathered in the center of the hallway. Opal and Sandy were sitting at their chairs. Luanna had gone to find another chair. Dorian was the teacher. School began with morning ceremonies. Sandy recited the Pledge of Allegiance. The other students, Luanna and Opal, joined her for the Black National Anthem. Sandy was leading. She had the tune correct, but she was making up the words. Luanna then recited the Pledge of Allegiance with Dorian. They recited it correctly. Luanna continued with a poem as Sandy and Opal listened.

During this school session, Dorian (the teacher) wanted the children to be quiet and to pay attention to her. There was a lot of screaming and very little encouragement. The focus of the session was spelling.

Dorian: *Yeah. Okay everybody can you pay attention. You all have free time. No talking though.*

Opal: *She's talking.* [Pointing at Sandy.]

Dorian: *No talking please.*

Dorian: *Raise your hand and tell me how you spell "three." Somebody raise their hand.*

[Dorian waited and then asked Sandy and Opal to give her their piece of paper.]

Dorian: *Luanna how you spell "GOOD LOOK"?*

Luanna: *G.* [Pause.]

Dorian: *I can't hear you. That's how you gonna get an F.*

Dorian asked the class to spell more words, but none of the children were able to spell, and thus she switched to counting for a short time. She asked the children to count to ten and they did. The younger children wanted to count the numbers instead of spelling them.

Dorian ended the academic part of the session and informed the class that she had a surprise for them later. Before the surprise they had to take a nap and think about what they were going to have for their class party. After the their second pretend nap, Dorian asked the class what they thought was going to be at the party. All the students rejoiced and screamed “icecream.” Dorian dismissed the students for a bathroom and water break. After the break, they decided to play house. They pretended to get dressed, go shopping, and visit some restaurants. Sandy was Luanna's daughter and Opal was Dorian's daughter. When they returned home from the outing, Dorian picked a piece of paper and told Sandy that she was going to put her in school. She started filling out the necessary forms. She filled the pretend registration forms and placed small X's in the small boxes she drew. I asked her what she was filling out. She told me she was filling out her age and address. This registration process lasted for almost five minutes and ended when more children came upstairs.

I approached this group once their play session was over to ask them why they played school. My interview with this group revealed that they not only played school together, but they also played house, fashion show, and shelter. They told me that they were bored most of the time, and, because they had to go to bed too early, they played school even in bed. They gathered their school books to play school in the hallway.

Since I did not get the opportunity to observe Dorian and Luanna playing shelter, I interviewed them about it. Luanna explained that they carried their book bags around the shelter pretending to find a shelter after their friends "kicked them out." They walked around their dorm ten times and asked Sandy's mom if there was any room at the shelter. Sandy's mom told them that they had come to the wrong place and that there were no rooms available. Finally they found a shelter and slept in their beds.

Discussion

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.

By witnessing the literacy interactions between the older school-age children and the younger children, it is quite evident that these interactions were valuable and needed to be enhanced and encouraged by the shelter staff. Furthermore, these interactions (as limited as they were) embody what literacy researchers espouse to be some of the key qualities needed to promote literacy in young children. Viewing the play episode between Laura and Ellen provide a small glimpse of the requisite characteristics of literacy development. As described in the results, Laura (ten years old) and Ellen (five years old) engaged in literacy playing school when they were not fighting with each other. Laura used her school resources, like worksheets and textbooks to teach concepts that were challenging for Ellen. Ellen was also given positive reinforcement several times during this

teaching episode.

There were components of reading, writing, and oral language in both the play sessions observed. Also, to some degree there was "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). Furthermore, Ellen at least was "inducted into the model of literacy implicitly held by the more expert performer" (Wells, 1992, p. 147). This joint activity involved talk related to the literary task. (Teale, 1984; Wells, 1992). However, "a predictable and secure atmosphere" (Snow et al., 1991, p. 162) is also an important component of children's literacy development. The shelter environment was neither "predictable" nor "secure" and most importantly, during the course of four months, I observed Ellen to have had the benefit of such interaction only once. The young literate person's influence was short-lived, because Laura was sent to live with her father out of state. Thus, Ellen was briefly exposed to a positive learning opportunity.

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 the 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.

Other concerns related to homeless school-age children as highlighted by past research and my research include the need to have the space with peace and quiet at the shelter for homework. At Joseph's shelter there were services such as the playgroup. However, the play facilitator focused mainly on the younger children during school hours. Thus, after-school hours were not conducive to homework needs of the older school-age children. There needs to be more than one facilitator and they should be present during the evenings and on weekends to help the children.

In addressing the emotional and socialization problems of older children that are common consequences of homelessness, shelter appointed social workers and counselors, need to help with everything from academic to social counseling. They further need in-service training programs to help raise the awareness and sensitivity to the problems and daily concerns of these children. These children want to "talk" to someone. They need to be heard and consoled in meaningful ways. These older children need attention and support while they are at the shelter. They need

individualized attention from volunteers and shelter staff in terms of their emotional needs because they are unable to cope with shelter living successfully.

While keeping in mind that shelter living is not the desirable outcome for families and specially children, we must further explore and research ways the role of the older school age children in providing literacy opportunities to their own families and to other families and children at the shelter.

We as researcher, educators, shelter directors and policy-makers must understand that “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). Let’s get to work.

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