

# Supporting the Literacy Development of Children Living in Homeless Shelters

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Insights into how educators can create greater classroom support for homeless children, particularly in literacy learning and development, are provided in this article.

Diego was incredible. He had just come from Mexico and he had the most incredible vocabulary. Just a tremendous vocabulary. He just spoke English so beautifully...I asked her [Diego's mom] and she said that he had learned it watching TV and also by talking to people in the hotel that was the shelter...whoever he was talking to could have been a former university professor because this kid was just tremendous...[when] he told me [they were moving]...I said, "You've got to learn to read, and if you go to [another state] you won't have a chance to be here very long and I'm really worried about you because you've got to be in one place long enough to get reading. If you can get reading, and you go anywhere you want, then you're going to be OK." Well, Diego went home and he had a talk with his mom and then the mom came back and she said, "I was going to go to [another state], but we're not going to go. We're going to wait until the end of the school year and then we'll go..." And it made me realize again the power of our words and the power that we have to influence and truly make a difference.

—First-grade teacher

Each night in the United States approximately 1.5 million children do not have a home to call their own (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2009). While homelessness is a huge problem, it is also true that any time labels are attached to children, there is a danger of stereotyping.

Educators don't intend to do a disservice, but in the absence of factual understandings of what students go through, filling in the blanks with assumptions is too easily done. No doubt the word *homeless* engenders fear and worry, and when coupled with children we tend to think of only the negative. As a result of observing and interviewing many children and mothers, as well as social service workers, teachers, principals, and county office personnel in southern California and western Tennessee, we have learned much of what families experience during a challenging time of transition in their lives (see MacGillivray, 2010a; MacGillivray, Ardell, & Curwen, in press, to learn more about our work). Ultimately in this article we provide insights into how educators can create greater classroom support for this population, particularly in literacy learning and development. First, we present some background information about the most recent and influential national policy related to families who are homeless.

## Federal Policy Defining Homelessness

The McKinney Homeless Assistance Act of 1987 defines a homeless person as one who (a) lacks a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence or (b) lives in a shelter, an institution, or a place not designed for, or ordinarily used, as a sleeping accommodation for human beings. The Act is also meant to ensure that children of homeless families continue to have access to public schooling. The reauthorization of the McKinney Act by the federal No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 reiterates this guarantee, including children's right to remain in their school of origin

with district-paid transportation. Still, the barriers to an uninterrupted school experience are monumental. Issues related to residency, guardianship, school records, immunization, and transportation, although addressed by this legislation, can still be obstacles to school attendance (Mawhinney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006; Sinatra, 2007; Stronge, 2000). These impediments are best understood through a description of life in a homeless shelter.

## What Living in a Homeless Shelter Means

In our research, we learned that families tend to use shelters when all other housing options have been exhausted. Many have lived with friends and extended family until the situation became unbearable due to strained interpersonal relations, insufficient space, or limited financial resources. Parents worry from night to night about where the family will sleep. Emergency or long-term homeless shelters may be the only option.

The term *homeless shelter* encompasses variety and diversity with respect to purpose (e.g., religious affiliation, domestic violence shelters), offerings and services (e.g., room, self-contained apartment, kitchen privileges), and rules for residency (e.g., curfews, mandatory meetings). The majority of family shelters serve only mothers and their children. This gender bias is in part explained by the fact that 84% of families experiencing homelessness are headed by women (Buron, Cortes, Culhane, Khadduri, & Poulin, 2008).

Shelters are not regulated by the government unless they are receiving federal Housing and Urban Development monies, so there are often no minimum standards or official guidelines for a homeless shelter. In our work, we visited or learned about shelters that offered families varied living arrangements ranging from apartments, a private bedroom and bath, shared sleeping space in churches, and sleeping cots assembled in an outdoor parking lot. Still, there are some general commonalities across shelters. Frequently a shelter establishes a set of rules that families must follow to maintain their residence status. Such mandates may include staying clean and sober, transferring wages or paying a nightly charge, keeping evening curfews often as early as 6:00 p.m., maintaining consistent school attendance

## Reflection Question

What are some of the misconceptions many people have about homeless children and their reading needs?

or demonstrated job pursuit, attending mandated meetings several nights a week while children are in shelter-provided childcare, and, in some cases, staying away from the shelter when the children are in school.

Other shelter requirements affect family stability and cohesiveness. For example, 55% of the cities surveyed by the U.S. Conference of Mayors (2006) report that families may have to break up to be sheltered. With few exceptions, daughters of all ages can accompany their mothers to a shelter while sons over the age of 12 cannot. Depending on the shelter, a family's length of stay can range anywhere from six weeks to two years. Despite these variations, many goals are the same: mothers have to find a job and a safe place to live, clean up their credit, pay off utility bills, and—for some—get clean and sober. With the demand for shelter space, there is very little room for misstep on the part of families because there are always new families who will agree to abide by the shelter's expectations. Although mothers still take primary responsibility for meeting their children's needs, the shelter can also influence the types of activities available to children. These resources may include items that promote children's educational experiences such as computers and children's books.

## Authors' Perspective

We examined the literacy practices of families living in homeless shelters as well as perceptions of homeless children through participant observation and interviews conducted in western Tennessee and southern California. Formal interviews took place with over 70 stakeholders including supervisors and staff at shelters for homeless families, persons related to nonprofit organizations that serve children who are homeless, principals, classroom teachers, and mothers and children staying in shelters for

homeless families. Laurie (first author) also served as a participant observer in one shelter for four months, documenting informal conversations and families' interactions with text or text-related events, such as discussions about the Bible. For this article, we drew upon transcripts from the formal interviews and field notes from the observations.

Sociocultural theory framed our work and allowed us to see the critical role of context in assigning meaning to events. We used a robust definition which includes the physical, social, and geographical dimensions of context. This offered a lens to better understand literacy interactions. This is particularly true with families living in shelters because many teachers know so little about this situation. For example, when we talk about storybook reading before bedtime, we assume that children feel safe and have their own personal space to relax, but that in fact may not be the case. Our attention to larger unrelated literacy events seeks to situate reading and writing within the often looming issues of housing, employment, and health. We do not believe one's competency in literacy prevents homelessness or resolves the surrounding issues, rather we are struck by the way mothers and children take up literacy practices during a time of crisis (MacGillivray, 2010b).

## Family Literacy Practices Within a Shelter

Upon entering the first shelter Laurie studied, one dedicated to serving mothers and children who were victims of domestic violence, she explained to the families that she was there to document their literacy practices. The response from many families was that while they were happy to have her there, they did not believe she would see them doing anything. This reflects the prevalent misconception that only storybook reading or school-like activities count as reading and writing. Only a few weeks later, she had observed several instances within and across families of mothers and children engaging in literacy events such as passing notes across the dinner table to ensure private conversations in the large social space, studying together with flashcards at night, making Mother's Day cards, decorating their rooms with Bible verses and books from the public library, and discussing good books they had read with one another.

Awareness seemed to increase their attention to these wider practices. Mothers and children began to share with Laurie other issues that shaped their literacy practices such as how their personal collections of books were locked up in storage and how their prior journal writing practices were suspended due to the lack of privacy in the shelter. They also noted how important the public library was to them as a no-cost, safe, high-quality, family-oriented place to spend time with their children. Mothers indicated how much they relied on connections with religious institutions to help them reinvent themselves. This social connection was kept at all costs, even if it meant that they had to meet with their evening Bible study group over the phone due to nighttime curfew rules. While these examples demonstrate how life in the shelter both impedes family literacy practices and spurs families to expand upon their existing repertoire, we believe that the most significant consequence of the interaction was the value assigned to what they were doing for children in terms of modeling and facilitating literate practices.

## Working With Children and Families Residing in Shelters: Five Perspectives

The daily circumstances of homelessness can easily get lost in the discussion of broad trends and generalizations. Drawing from multiple interviews and observations in southern California and western Tennessee and their surroundings areas, we selected a few key voices that offer more personal perspectives. Rather than a single in-depth case study, we decided to share five outlooks that offer an introduction to the complexity surrounding children living without homes. The voices speak of their own conditions and in that way capture how literacy can be integral to the lives of those caught in the crisis of homelessness.

In what follows, we present five points of view:

1. A director of a homeless shelter
2. A principal of a school with many students who are homeless
3. A teacher who has many students in her classroom who do not have homes
4. A parent living in a homeless shelter
5. A child living in a homeless shelter

These voices were chosen from more than 70 interviews because the individuals were articulate and brought critical issues to the forefront. In no way are they meant to be representational of the experiences found in our work; rather we hope they will nurture complex conversations about homeless children and literacy. After each perspective, we address what teachers might learn from these vignettes.

### ***A Director of a Homeless Shelter***

Laurie got to know Ms. Carpenter (all names have been changed to protect privacy) through a series of interviews. She is a director of a long-term shelter for women who are homeless, have young children, and are addicted to drugs and alcohol. During the conversations it became clear how Ms. Carpenter's identity as the director was deeply intertwined with her literate self. The quote that follows signals two key ideas. The first is Ms. Carpenter's recognition of herself as a role model. The second key point clarifies her view of how literacy could be used to equalize hierarchical relationships inherent in shelter living:

I know that I am looked at in leadership, and they're following my lead, and I just happen to love to read, and so I bring that to the table. And I enjoy it. I love talking. I love sharing what I've found and what I'm reading, and um, and I thank God that I do model a behavior that the women like. So part of [mothers and children] interacting with me is, "Ms. Carpenter let me tell you what I read."...We talk about a book we love.

Evidence of Ms. Carpenter's belief in literacy's potential to uplift lives is reflected in many facets of the routines established in this shelter. There is a quiet place where women can read. Daily time is set aside for mothers to read to their children. Ms. Carpenter makes it clear that all mothers need to focus on books with their children each day. In literature discussions, the mothers talk about the Bible and other types of inspirational and motivational materials. This shelter director serves as a powerful model for how to be a literate person and a leader in scaffolding the residents' own reading practices. Importantly, Ms. Carpenter creates literacy opportunities that many families who live in more permanent houses may not have.

What we found most striking at this shelter were the ways the director used literacy to foster intimacy between a mother and child. Ms. Carpenter discovered that many mothers beginning to heal from

substance abuse become aware of how their own children had been hurt in the process. Ms. Carpenter explained that this realization can sometimes make mothers hesitant to hold their children. One of the reasons she mandated daily reading time was because "it is the most powerful and effective way that we start bonding between our mothers and our children." Storybook time then serves as a back door to intimacy. As a family read storybooks together, Ms. Carpenter noticed how over time they tended to scoot closer together. Read-alouds became a way to not only strengthen literacy practices but also to nurture parent-child relationships.

*What can teachers learn from this example?* Homelessness does not necessarily rule out the significance that reading and writing can play in individual lives. In fact, a shelter can actually increase a family's exposure to a variety of adults who have the potential to serve as models. There are often teachers, professional or volunteer, who are present for evening tutoring. Case managers and shelter staff can be influential in creating structural changes, such as schedules and events in which literacy plays a key role. They can also engage in individual acts such as recommending a book or inquiring into a book's plot. Certainly we do not want to deny the presence of negative models in shelters, which are filled with adults and children in crisis. Nor do we want to create the sense that shelter staff members, already busy with a multitude of tasks and pressing priorities, always make literacy a top priority. But what we see here is the opportunity for adults who can act as extended and supportive forces in the lives of families in crisis. As educators, we must all first recognize the potential and possibility even in the most seemingly unlikely places.

### ***Principal of an Elementary School***

One of our more inspiring stories came from an interview with the principal of an elementary school that





served a majority homeless population of students. As a result, district officials communicated with the principal that they would understand that her school's test scores might be affected by issues of poverty and transience. Determined to prove otherwise, this administrator organized an action plan that included, among other things, holding intake meetings with each new family, scheduling immediate academic assessments for each new student, fostering ties with the community to bring resources to the school

*During a lesson in which the first-grade children were making three-dimensional habitats, the students started making connections to their own difficult living conditions.*

site, and maintaining high academic expectations for all students. As a result of such deliberate action, her school's test scores rose and the site was granted an official recognition of excellence from the state. She explained that viewing her new students only as bright and capable, while also paying attention to their specific academic, personal, and social needs, contributed to the school's rise. For example, she pointed out that many

families and children were often reluctant to identify themselves as living in a shelter. Many teachers, therefore, were not always aware which students in their class, if any, were homeless. The key in these situations was to address social issues such as homelessness within the context of the regular curriculum, to be prepared with knowledge of community resources, and to be well-informed of families' fundamental rights should children identify themselves as homeless.

*What can teachers learn from this example?* Individual children's needs across all areas of their life—academic, social, and emotional—are important to take into account. Immediate academic assessments helped teachers to address children's needs. Intake meetings helped school officials understand the family's unique situation, and were particularly helpful in this case because the school was so well-networked in the community. For example, the school's staff could help families instantly by providing backpacks with school supplies, assisting with paperwork associated with enrolling in free lunch programs, and arranging regular site visits of a

mobile health care clinic so that children could have their health needs addressed. Because many families struggle with the stigma associated with the label of homelessness, personal relationships established during an intake meeting help them to transition to a new schooling institution quickly. Moreover, a message of respect and concern is communicated by the school.

## **A Classroom Teacher**

A few years ago, Laurie got to know a remarkable first-grade teacher who works in a school with a high rate of children who are homeless. This educator's focus on the classroom environment reflects a deep sensitivity to the challenging lives of many of her students. Many of them are precariously housed; their day-to-day lives do not preclude sleeping in different places. In the midst of chaotic lives, this teacher considers her classroom to be an oasis. Fresh flowers are just as important as basics such as paper towels and soap, which she supplies. Her explicit intention is to make the parents and children feel that the classroom is their home and to offer a tranquil place to learn (Monkman, MacGillivray, & Leyva, 2003).

This sensitivity was also evident in her curriculum. For example, during a lesson in which the first-grade children were making three-dimensional habitats, the students started making connections to their own difficult living conditions. As Laurie and her colleagues wrote in an earlier article,

Many of the children talked about overcrowded apartments and the homes they wished to have in the future. Through a variety of [quality children's] literature, such as *A House Is a House for Me* (Hoberman, 1978) the teacher encouraged the children to think beyond a literal notion of a house as the current place where one lives. The students were encouraged to reflect, look toward the future, and imagine possibilities. (MacGillivray, Rueda, & Martinez, 2004, p. 151)

This teacher responded to the children's talk and more notably also created a space for them to address their situations in the curriculum.

*What can teachers learn from this example?* Our actions as teachers and the ways we think about our classrooms are critical. This teacher saw the need for her room to be a place of comfort for parents and children. To accomplish this goal she sometimes spent her own money to purchase basic materials. In the first-grade curriculum, understanding one's home and place in the surrounding community is a typical

social studies theme that she seamlessly adapted to include children's background experiences. It might have been easier to quickly move to another assignment due to a discomfort in dealing with the children's realities. Instead she opened up the notion of what homes can be. She created a space for children to talk about the realities of their lives, something that is often overlooked in a crowded school day's schedule. Through re-imagining their lives, she encouraged children to look forward and to envision alternatives.

### ***A Parent Living in a Homeless Shelter***

We have met many amazing parents during our work with families who are living without homes. We selected Lacey because she is one example of a mother with literacy practices of her own and a desire for her child to be a strong reader and writer. She is a 25-year-old single mother of a 22-month-old son. She lives in a long-term shelter in which she has her own apartment. Growing up, Lacey was one of five children and even though her mother worked steadily, sometimes holding down two jobs, they were homeless three or four times. She herself became homeless after economic and domestic stress ended her marriage. Lacey has been in this shelter for four months and has created the environment with her son in mind. She shared, "Everything that I buy him, I want it to be a learning experience from the fridg-er-ator [sic] to the restroom to his room is a learning experience for him."

Lacey dropped out of high school in ninth grade, but she loves to read and write and has aspirations to someday start a magazine for teenagers to satisfy what she perceives as an unfilled niche in the marketplace. She describes her reading choices as, "Mostly, um, nonfiction, I got some fiction, um love novels, um it just depends on what sparks my interest..." Lacey also talked about her toddler's emergent reading behaviors, "He's not even reading the book. He was like 'chum chum chum, chum chum....' And that's exactly how he sounds because he, he's reading. He can't read, but he's reading like that." Lacey's family has experienced homelessness in two generations, yet this has not stripped away the importance of reading and writing. Literacy is still the warp and weft of their lives.

*What can teachers learn from this example?*  
Parents often see their children interacting with texts

beginning at a very young age but may or may not understand the significance. In this example, Lacey recognizes important behavior and she might have appreciated a teacher's insights about the developmental milestone. Through parents describing their children's out-of-school behavior and teachers sharing the children's in-school behavior, a powerful partnership can be anchored in a mutual desire to support the child. As teachers we can foster a sense of community by extending parents' understanding of their children's literacy development and making them feel critical to the learning process (Walker-Dalhouse & Risko, 2008).

### ***A Child Living in a Homeless Shelter***

The most striking thing about the children we have met is their ability to survive and often thrive under very difficult conditions. We were particularly struck by the account of one near-adolescent and his perspective into how transitory residency impacted his academic performance. Twelve-year-old Leslie was in foster care between the ages of 4 and 9 and then lived in a home for three years with his mother and four of his five siblings. During that time, he was on the honor roll at his school. Most recently, they left their house due to spousal abuse and they have been homeless for five months.

The consequences of living in a homeless shelter are often visible. Leslie, a preteen, has lost his right to be alone and complained to his mother, "I'm 12. I can't even go to the bathroom without you being right outside the door." His exasperation over the lack of privacy was exacerbated by the toll that his family's high mobility was having on his academic program. When he recently received a poor report card, his mother shared his frustrated explanation,

It's because we're moving. We've been to four schools in the last five months. How did you expect me to do? I'm an honor roll student. I know you expect it, but you've got to get for real. It's a lot of changes. You've got to look at it from my standpoint.

Leslie elaborated on the cost of these moves, "One school is in one thing and then when you go to another school it's a whole different thing.... They're all easy, it's just you miss stuff. That's what makes it harder." From the child's perspective, the struggle was not about following the same curriculum. As Leslie said, "All teachers teach differently." His strong academic

skills were not enough for him to weather frequent moves. The need to grasp each teacher's instructional and communicative style overrode his academic abilities.

*What can teachers learn from this example?* Moments of quiet time and alone time can be especially important for children living among the commotion of others' noise. Also, helping children adapt to a new school is more than providing a uniform curriculum. Classroom communities have their unique cultures with agreed upon practices, norms, and behaviors. Conversations about classroom expectations and routines are critical to help the child acclimate to a new learning community. But more than that, as teachers, we need to be aware of our own assumptions about classroom expectations that newly arrived students might not have the time to figure out. Clarifying both the rules and the norms in a nonjudgmental, matter-of-fact way can help children transition into our classrooms.

## Looking Across the Perspectives

As often happens, thinking about the experiences of one particular population of students helps us to be better teachers to all of our students. Hearing these five perspectives can guide us as educators to reconsider the important part we play in the lives of children, their families, and in the community as a whole. First, like the shelter director, we can be role models integrating literacy into our lives. Listening to her experience also reminds us that we must be open to the possibility that our students may already

have literate role models present in their surroundings. Knowing that these powerful allies may exist allows us to see children living in difficult circumstances in a new light. Second, the principal's voice reminds us of the important stance we take as teachers: that of advocates for children. By recognizing that we may be in a position to connect families with the community at large, we can be poised to take immediate

action in addressing their needs and concerns. Third, the trio of voices from the teacher, parent, and child serve as a reminder to cultivate mutual trust. Sharing our experiences with one another can help make sense of the situation at hand. Taking on this kind of responsibility—to help create a safe, stable, and meaningful classroom environment—can be powerful in the lives of all students, and particularly for this population of children.

## Suggestions for Educators

Our purpose in writing this article is to provide information that may assist educators with a better understanding of how to create greater classroom support, particularly in literacy learning and development, for children and families who are homeless. As stated previously, these different perspectives are not representative of each group but rather offer a multifaceted glimpse into homelessness—the full implications of which are difficult to grasp. Drawing from our conversations with homeless mothers, children, and other stakeholders, we would like to make the following specific suggestions for educators. Although these recommendations are targeted for a particular student population, we see these as applying universally to professional practice.

- Remember that school is often a place of refuge, comfort, and stability. For many children, especially those who move frequently from place to place, school may be the best part of their day. Welcoming strategies to help children settle in to a new school situation such as intake meetings, immediate academic assessments, and assigning peer buddies can help ease fears children may have as they encounter a new situation. Additionally, keeping the academic expectations high while also accounting for children's basic human needs, such as adequate nutrition and sleep, means that teachers have to be flexible and thoughtful in their decision making for this population of students.
- Remember that families residing in shelters have restrictions on their time. These restrictions apply to evening as well as daytime hours. To maintain their eligibility to stay at a shelter, family members may not be in a position to attend their child's teacher meetings or school events because of the shelter's competing work or



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schooling requirements. Rather than interpreting parental absences as a lack of commitment to their children's education, ask families what you can do to support an ongoing partnership with them in educating their children. Phone conferences might be a good alternative, or initiating an interactive journal with the parent about what's happening at school and at home could help with teacher–parent dialogue.

- Remember that children in shelters may have less time and space for homework. While some parental outreach strategies such as newsletters, learning supports, and positive notes home are valuable (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998), the unique pulls and distractions of families living in a shelter must be recognized. As teachers, we can be flexible in homework requirements, such as providing a weekly packet of work due every seven days. This may help families who do not have their weeknights free due to mandatory meetings at the shelter.
- Remember that your role in the community can make a difference for a child and his or her family. It may seem trite, but as educators, our professional expertise and our local knowledge can ease the way for new arrivals. Educate yourself on the rights of homeless families, available community resources specific to homeless children, and available community resources for children in general. This information will allow you to advocate and network to help meet students' needs. Connecting children and their families to community institutions, such as public libraries, may also be a good idea.
- Remember that literacy plays an important role for children and families. Especially in times of crisis, it can provide a bridge for individuals to find refuge in stories of others' experiences (MacGillivray, 2010b). People often use literature to make sense of their own situation, write to record their thoughts, or read to temporarily escape from the difficulties in their own lives (Noll & Watkins, 2003). Teachers can use research-based comprehension strategies such as making connections and inferences to link texts in multiple ways to children's lives (Harvey & Goudvis, 2007; Keene & Zimmermann, 2007). Instruction need not be in the context of a formal unit on homelessness per se, but instead

can address universal generalizations such as the value of diversity, tolerance, and perseverance, and the importance of community.

Homelessness is caused by economic and social problems that have yet to be solved. In many ways, children without homes are more like other students than they are different. The life challenges faced by these children can be found in homes across the social strata. For example, many of our families with homes face similar situations such as divorce, mental or physical illness, substance abuse, and job loss. As educators, the soundness of our practice comes from the time we take to learn about the lives of all the children in our classroom and from our creation of spaces where they can name, discuss, and work through issues in their lives.

### Note

All authors contributed equally to this article.

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