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The impact of homelessness on young children: Building resilience through supportive early educational interventions

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THE IMPACT OF HOMELESSNESS

ON YOUNG CHILDREN: BUILDING RESILIENCE

THROUGH SUPPORTIVE EARLY EDUCATIONAL

INTERVENTIONS

by

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Thesis

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigates and analyzes the barriers faced by homeless children and their families in southeast Michigan. The experiences of current or formerly homeless families are documented in relation to perceived obstacles and supports in their schools and child care centers through open-ended, semi-structured interviews and ethnographic classroom observations. A small sample of parents, children, teachers, and case workers are interviewed, and nine children are observed in three schools. The analysis of data reveals significant barriers and obstacles for children who experience indifferent and demeaning treatment in their school environments. Conversely, the findings point to significant benefits for homeless children in caring and committed school environments, where school personnel advocate for the educational rights of homeless children. Recommendations include training of teachers and other school personnel to facilitate awareness and sensitivity to the social and educational needs of homeless children, and the creation of respectful and inclusive school environments.

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Chapter One: Introduction and Background

Introduction

As a teacher in a low-income school district in southeast Michigan, I became concerned about how families experiencing homelessness were treated by school personnel. I found that homeless families were often marginalized in the classroom and in the school due to their living conditions and poverty. Instead of being met with respectful, sensitive environments, the trauma they experienced from the uncertainty of homelessness was exacerbated by the attitudes and perceptions of indifferent school personnel that did little to meet their basic needs. School, the place that could be a safe haven for these children and their families, delivering consistent routines and support, had become just as insecure as the world around them. I wondered what would happen if homeless children and their families were met with the compassionate, respectful attitudes that they deserved. How would appropriate intervention services and programs affect their daily lives in school, and what could be done to assist their families?

Statement of Problem

More than 3 million people each year experience homelessness; 1.3 million are children (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2008). In the state of Michigan, there are 79,940 homeless people. Families account for 51% of this homeless population, with children representing more than half of that total number (Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness, 2007). Homelessness is a significant trauma for children and their families. Children who are homeless often emulate depression, rage, and mental anguish that the adults in their families undergo. Further, they experience considerable behavioral problems that lead to feelings of failure early in their schooling (Quint, 1994).

Homeless children and their families face emotional, physical, social, and behavioral problems that can impede academic development and achievement.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate and analyze the barriers homeless families face in school and in accessing high-quality child care, after-school care, and school intervention programs. I explored what interventions and services were helpful to parents and children and what practices hurt them. Documenting the experiences and perspectives of current or formerly homeless children and their families about obstacles and supports in relation to schooling was of particular importance. To gain their perspectives, I interviewed a small, volunteer sample of current or formerly homeless parents and their children. In addition, a small sample of preschool and elementary teachers and administrators in southeast Michigan who have had homeless students in their classrooms, schools, or centers, were interviewed about their perceptions of obstacles and supports. The following questions guided my study:

1) How do homeless children and their parents perceive their school?

2) What are the key obstacles that homeless children and their families experience that prevent school success?

3) What are the services and interventions that help homeless children and their families experience school success?

Background of Study

In response to the growing numbers of homeless individuals in the United States the Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act was passed by Congress in 1987 (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987). This was the first federally funded Act that addressed the problem of homelessness and provided emergency assistance for homeless individuals. A subsection of the McKinney Act, Education for Homeless Children and Youth or Part B, required that states receiving funds under this act guarantee that homeless children would have access to free appropriate public education in the mainstream school environment. Reauthorizations in 1990 and 1994 improved support services for homeless children and included preschool aged children in programs. In 2002 the McKinney-Vento Act, a further reauthorization of the McKinney Act, was established to further protect the rights of homeless children in public schools, providing for further support services such as transportation, immediate enrollment and attendance, and prohibiting segregation from mainstream schools (Stewart B. McKinney Homeless Assistance Act, 1987, 1990; Polakow, 2007).

Although the McKinney-Vento Act aimed at protecting the legal rights of homeless children and their families to access schools, research shows that the schools themselves can be barriers. Homeless children are more likely to be retained, have lower rates of academic achievement, are disproportionately placed in special education classes, and face stigmatization from insensitive school personnel and peers (Tucker, 1999). Current research suggests that early childhood and elementary educators and schools can positively and powerfully support and empower homeless children and their families, supporting their academic development and achievement (Swick, 2004). Through comprehensive support services such as transportation arrangements, family literacy practices, and the provision of

basic needs, homeless children and their families can experience educational and personal successes.

The barriers that homeless children face that impede their educational success are far-reaching and vital to address. Without the opportunity for a successful education, homeless children are less likely to escape poverty as adults (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008a). Many researchers have investigated the support services that homeless children and their families need in order to have successful school experiences. This thesis investigated the perspectives and experiences of homeless children and their parents in southeast Michigan. It is hoped that findings from the study will serve to provide recommendations to school districts and school personnel that will create opportunities for homeless children to succeed in school, as well as provide support for their families.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Children in Poverty

Homelessness and poverty are intricately linked. More than 13 million children in the United States, 18% of all children, live in families that fall below the federal poverty level (FPL) defined as $22,050 for a family of four in 2009 (Cauthen & Fass, 2008; National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009a; "The 2009 Health and Human Services Poverty Guidelines," 2009). Children who live in families with incomes below that federal poverty level are referred to as poor. Current estimates suggest that a family of four would need an income of about two times the federal poverty level to meet their basic needs (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009a). Children who live in families with incomes below $44,100, or two times the federal poverty level, are referred to as low-income. In Michigan there are 1,417,251 families with 2,449,339 children. Approximately 17% or 418,943 of these children live in poor families, and 37% or 903,941 children live in low-income families, just below the national average of 39% (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009a; National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009b). People living in poverty are most at risk for experiencing homelessness. Further, children under the age of six have a higher risk of experiencing homelessness than their older peers, as higher percentages of these children live in poor or low-income homes (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009b).

As employment opportunities vanish, wages decline, and public assistance is restricted, more families fall into poverty. People who live in poverty are frequently unable to pay for food, housing, child care, healthcare, education and other basic needs. They must make difficult choices, allocating their resources to cover only some of these provisions. Often housing goes unpaid since it consumes the greatest proportion of one's income and

there is a genuine shortage of affordable housing. People who live in poverty are most at risk for becoming homeless.

The Impact of Homelessness on Children and their Families

The number of homeless families with children has increased dramatically within the past decade. Families with children are the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, and poverty together with the lack of affordable housing are the principal causes for this increase. More than 3 million people each year experience homelessness, and over 1/3 (1.3 million) are children (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 2008). In Michigan, there are almost 80,000 homeless people, with families composing 51% of this homeless population (Michigan Coalition Against Homelessness, 2007). The ever-increasing number of homeless children in Michigan has a direct bearing on the educational systems in place to provide the support and intervention services homeless children need to be successful in school.

Homelessness is a traumatic, demoralizing experience for children and their families, disrupting their existence, health, and well-being (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008b). The experience of homelessness for children is more life-encompassing than simply losing a home. Children's physical, emotional, and behavioral needs are jeopardized as they live with the day-to-day uncertainty that is the reality of being homeless. The loss of access to medical care, hunger, and sporadic school attendance lead to impaired health and developmental, psychological, and social growth problems (Stronge & Hudson, 1999). The effects of the uncertainty and instability associated with homelessness are most harmful during early childhood or the formative years, disrupting both physical and social-emotional development (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008b).

As families with children slip into homelessness, the physical health and development of their children is usually affected. Children who are homeless are often in fair or poor physical health with higher rates of asthma, ear infections, stomach issues, cognitive delays, fine and gross motor deficits, and language delays. Compared to their housed peers, homeless children have twice the rate of chronic illnesses and suffer from acute health problems more frequently (Walsh & Buckley, 1994; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008b). Impaired health can be attributed to numerous factors, such as extreme poverty, inadequate conditions in emergency shelters, hunger and poor nutrition, lack of health insurance or medical care, and sleep deprivation. Further, a young child's brain development is affected by the stress associated with homelessness. Early experiences influence whether a young child's developing brain provides a strong or weak foundation for future learning and behavior. Stress associated with conditions such as homelessness causes the body to produce elevated stress hormones and changed levels of brain chemicals, which modify the structural design and chemistry of a developing brain. These bodily reactions lead to learning, language, and memory impairments, health-damaging behaviors, and later adult lifestyles that may undermine both a sense of well-being and the capacity to be successful at school or work ("A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy," 2007; Krugman, 2008).

Homelessness also affects the social-emotional development of children. Homeless children are three to four times more likely to experience emotional and behavioral problems than the general population (Holloway, 2002). Anxiety, depression, anger, and shame are common feelings among homeless children. Manifestations of anxiety, depression, anger, and shame are often seen in behavior problems homeless children may exhibit. Just as frequently, however, many children become withdrawn, distancing themselves from peers

and teachers to keep secret the shame that is often felt as a consequence of their living conditions (Walsh & Buckley, 1994; National Coalition for the Homeless, 2008b). Homelessness leaves children with a feeling of loss and profound fear about the safety and security of their family and self. It injures a child's sense of identity, their connection to the world, rendering feelings of sadness and loss. Despite their intense feelings, homeless children are expected to navigate their way through schools and engage in the learning process (Walsh & Buckley, 1994). In reality, however, the stress of homelessness reduces a child's capacity to be successful in school (Rafferty, 1995).

The Educational Rights of Homeless Children

The Stewart B. McKinney Act (as described earlier) was passed by Congress in 1987 to provide emergency assistance such as shelter, medical care, and food to homeless individuals. A subsection of this act, Education for Homeless Children and Youth or Part B, required that states grant homeless children access to free appropriate public education in the mainstream school environment. Congress reauthorized Part B of this Act in both 1990 and 1994. These reauthorizations ordered states to improve the coordination of support services for homeless children and broaden programs to include preschool aged children. Under these reauthorizations, homeless children should have access to all programs and services that their housed peers receive, such as Title I and Head Start. The McKinney Act directs prompt transfer of immunization records, birth certificates, special services evaluations, and guardianship records, and requires transportation for homeless children. Further, states were to revise residency requirements so that a child may continue to attend his or her school of origin through the end of the school year or transfer to the area school where the child is sheltered, so that the best interests of the child are paramount (Stewart B. Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, 1990; Polakow, 2007).

In 2002 the McKinney-Vento Act, a reauthorization of the McKinney Act, was established to further protect the rights of homeless children in public schools providing for school liaisons, school selection, transportation, immediate enrollment and attendance, and prohibiting segregation in mainstream schools. States are also required to develop and implement training programs for school personnel centered on the needs of homeless children. While the legal rights of homeless children are explicitly laid out in the McKinney-Vento Act, many sections are not supported due to congressional funding cuts and noncompliance by states (Stewart B. Homeless Assistance Act of 1987, 1990; Polakow, 2007; Aviles de Bradley, 2008).

While homeless children should have access to public schools, there are barriers that often restrict their access to education such as proof of residency, proof of guardianship, lack of medical records and transportation (Mawhiney-Rhoads & Stahler, 2006; Rafferty 1995). School districts usually require families to show proof of residency for children to attend school. For a homeless family this is difficult to prove, since living out of a car or a shelter that may not be within the district lines negates adequate proof of residency. Children are admitted to attend school only with the approval of a parent or legal guardian. For homeless children who may be living with relatives or friends, this creates further obstacles. For runaway children and youth, enrollment is not possible without proof of a guardian. Homeless families often lack the appropriate vaccinations due to lack of medical care, and medical records are frequently missing. Both of these situations can result in schools denying enrollment. Transportation is an issue, as buses do not run outside district lines, often causing a child to miss school. Unpredictable attendance causes the child to miss large portions of instruction and become susceptible to academic failure. Under the McKinney Vento Act,

ease of enrollment and the provision of transportation are state mandates and noncompliance with these mandates violates children's educational rights. Despite the law, these barriers remain realities for many homeless children and their families. Additionally, the reality of homelessness has social and emotional effects on children such as low self-esteem, lack of peer acceptance, shame, aggressive behavior, and sleep and eating issues. All of these effects can interfere with academic achievement.

Garbarino, following Brofenbrenner (1979), believes it is necessary to use an ecological theory framework to understand vulnerable children's social-emotional development, and views children and their environments as "mutually shaping systems, each changing over time, each adapting in response to changes in the other" (1982, p. 16). The interaction between the environment and the individual is the basis for human development. Hence, children who experience socially toxic environments, filled with violence, poverty, disrupted relationships, despair, depression, and powerlessness, are most vulnerable to developmental damage (Garbarino, 1995), particularly those children who already experience developmental risk factors such as poverty and homelessness. Social toxicity undermines a child's self-worth and self-confidence.

As homeless children enter schools with damaged self-worth and self-confidence, they are further damaged by peer and teacher rejection. Rejection wears down a child's self-esteem and may lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy of incapacity and incompetence. Rejected children can develop behavioral problems and self-destructive behavior and form negative self-concepts. These damaging feelings impede a child's ability to from friendships and bonds of attachment, further interfering with academic achievement (Garbarino, 1995). As Garbarino points out, "Children need stable positive emotional relationships…this is the

single most important resource you can have to promote resilience in childhood: having someone who is crazy about you" (1995, p. 158).

Homeless children and their families need more than simply equal access to schooling. One of the most damaging aspects of homelessness for children and their families is the isolation they experience from the support and services they genuinely need (Swick, 2005). "The trauma of homelessness is immense and includes the disruption of existing social networks, family routines, and emotional grounding…" (Klein, Bittel, & Molnar, 1993, p. 22). Homeless children and their families often lack social capital, the benefits that individuals obtain from their associations and participation in social networks and organizations. The more connected one is to groups and individuals that have access to resources, the greater the possibility of acquiring concrete and social benefits such as educational opportunities, jobs, loans, and varied services. For homeless children and their families, their social networks and connections are usually limited to other poor and homeless individuals and organizations that have fewer resources, further exacerbating their isolation (Noguera, 2003).

This sense of connectedness, or social capital, is an important component of the support systems that children need to be successful in school. While the social capital that advantaged children possess is often taken for granted, it is glaringly missing from the foundation of formal schooling for destitute and homeless children. As all children reap the benefits of support systems and networks that add to their intellectual enrichment and school success, poor and homeless children need these networks to foster a sense of connectedness, a sense of well-being, and a sense of academic initiative (Maeroff, 1998). Further, supporting all families with resources and allies can lead to the formation of social networks that

promote the interests of families and, in turn, the school success experienced by their children (Noguera, 2001).

Along with fostering social and educational capital for homeless children and their families, schools must meet the emotional and social needs of these children. Maslow (1968) outlined the basic needs of love, security, and trust as the essential components for healthy growth and development. Homeless children confront barriers to these basic needs in the following ways:

Who Am I? The loss of the possession of things, a home, favorite books and toys, places to put things, has a great impact on a child's identity. The loss of identity is one of the most crucial needs that homeless children have.

Where Am I? The constant mobility that homeless children experience is damaging to the development of physical and psychological security.

How Am I? As the lives and existence of homeless children change rapidly, they experience anxiety over the safety, health, and well-being of themselves and their families (Swick, 1999).

Schools must be mindful of the stress homeless children and their families experience on a daily basis, centered on meeting their immediate basic needs. Bennett (2007) argues that until the basic needs of homeless children are met, educational agendas must be postponed. When a child's emotional and social needs are met first, learning will follow.

The educational needs of the homeless child are at risk due to many factors such as interruptions in schooling because of poor attendance or movement between schools, peer ridicule, grade retention, inappropriate classroom settings, lowered teacher expectations, and poor communication between school and shelter staff. School-age homeless children exhibit

lower reading and math achievement than housed children, scoring lower on standardized tests, and are referred for special education placement and recommended for grade retention at alarming rates (Rafferty, 1995; Walsh & Buckley, 1994). Part of meeting the emotional and social needs of homeless children and their families centers on providing opportunities for successful experiences and comprehensive support services (Rafferty, 1995; Stronge & Hudson, 1999). The detrimental barriers that serve to obstruct the educational opportunities of homeless children focus on the lack of (1) awareness of issues and concerns pertaining to homeless children and their families, (2) family involvement and support, (3) early and timely intervention services, and (4) effective coordination of support services and their delivery (Stronge & Hudson, 1999).

Barriers to Successful Educational Experiences

Awareness

Homeless students often face stigmatization, rejection, and insensitivity from their peers as well as teachers. The shame and embarrassment that accompany this treatment often leave homeless children reluctant to attend school. Teachers' perceptions of homeless children and their families are often problematic because they reflect the negative attitudes of our culture towards homelessness, i.e. as an individual weakness or deficit, rather than an effect of social injustices within our society. Teachers may blame the parents of homeless children for their situation instead of looking deeper into the causes of homelessness (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). Rather than viewing homelessness as a product of systemic inequality and injustice, poverty and homelessness are constructed as "moral" problems rooted in the breakdown of family structure and family values (Polakow, 2007).

It has been shown that some teachers believe that homeless students, particularly boys, are more difficult than non-homeless children. Teachers' beliefs and attitudes impact

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their treatment and teaching of homeless children. The most powerful barrier that homeless children and their families face is teachers who possess negative attitudes toward them (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). "In their fragile lives, the world of the classroom becomes a landscape of promise or a landscape of condemnation" (Polakow, 1993, p. 146). We expect teachers to be caring, sensitive advocates for all children, but little has been done to support teachers in meeting the needs of homeless children (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). The lack of awareness and sensitivity should be the focal point of training and development for school personnel.

Family Involvement and Support

A supportive school environment is not effective without the help of families (Stronge & Hudson, 1999). Negative school experiences from the past or fears surrounding their reality of homelessness are often reasons why families avoid school. Family stress, which is a circumstance of homelessness, is a barrier to healthy child development and family participation in their children's education (Stronge & Hudson, 1999). However, families who believe schools are sensitive to their needs and dedicated to meeting the educational needs of their children are more likely to participate in their children's education. Families and children must feel that they are accepted, valued, and supported as important people within the school, and schools must encourage dialogue between the family and the school (Swick, 1999; Swick and Bailey, 2004). Part of developing a relationship with homeless families that encourages communication, participation, and support begins with the attitudes and behaviors that teachers and school personnel exhibit in their exchanges with the families. Developing contacts with families, planning jointly for needs and goals of the children and their families, and establishing needed opportunities for communication are ways that nourish family involvement and support.

Early and Timely Intervention

Language, cognitive, and behavioral problems experienced by homeless children have a direct correlation with their experiences of homelessness during their formative years. Achievement gaps between poor and homeless children and their privileged peers begin before children even enter formal schooling. Most four-year-old poor or homeless children are an average of eighteen months behind their affluent peers, and this achievement gap remains present at the age of ten (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2007). High-quality early care and educational programs can help ensure that children will enter kindergarten ready to learn and reduce later grade retentions, suspensions, and special education referrals (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2009c; "A Science-Based Framework for Early Childhood Policy," 2007). High-quality preschool programs can provide young homeless children with environments that reduce stress, create opportunity, and foster educational and personal competence. While the benefits of high-quality preschools are clear, access to these programs is often limited due to inadequate space in the programs. Maintaining open slots for homeless children in existing preschool programs that can be filled by transient children is one way of ensuring early intervention to help counteract the language, cognitive, and behavioral effects of homelessness for young children (Stronge & Hudson, 1999).

Research indicates that as school-aged homeless children enter the schools, it is essential that school personnel determine appropriate classroom settings for meeting individual needs (Rafferty, 1995). Homeless children are often misplaced in inappropriate grade levels or within curriculum programs used in the classroom. Further, there may be no awareness of the special needs of the homeless child, resulting in long periods where no intervention services are delivered. Teachers must be skilled in identifying homeless

children's needs (Eddowes, 1993). Poverty, homelessness, abuse, violence, and drug abuse are all risk factors in a child's life that threaten the child's development and well-being. A child's resilience, or ability to recover from the trauma of homelessness and other risk factors, is increased by reducing the number of risk factors and increasing protective factors such as positive school experiences, supportive adults, and educational achievement (Douglass, 1996). Timely intervention services are examples of protective factors that nurture school success and achievement for homeless children. As authors Mawhinney-Rhoads and Stahler point out: "If school systems do not provide special educational interventions to address the particular educational barriers that these children face, then it is likely that these children will stay marginalized in the lowest economic rung of society" (2006, p. 289).

Coordination of Support Services

The issues that face homeless children urge schools to shift the focus from merely the child to that of the whole family. The schools must provide comprehensive services that incorporate sources of support for the whole family. "The nature of services is likely to be more social support oriented and less academically oriented than traditional education services" (Tucker, 1999, p. 92). The educational and personal needs of homeless children and their families are too expansive for any one school or agency to help on their own. The needs of these families are best met through coordination and collaboration of support services with other agencies that work with homeless families. Coordinating support services and their delivery would improve the provision of services for homeless children and their families (Rafferty, 1995, Tucker, 1999). If community agencies and schools work together they can provide a "tapestry" of programs aimed at meeting the needs of homeless children and their families (Tucker, 1999, p. 92).

Poverty and homelessness continue to be a pervasive feature in our society. As the homeless population continues to rise, homeless families are the fastest growing segment of this population. As homeless families attempt to access high-quality child care and school intervention programs, they are met with tremendous barriers that diminish their chances for academic success. Without the opportunity for a successful education, homeless children are less likely to escape poverty in adulthood. While a great deal of current research has explored the statistical effects of homelessness on the emotional, physical, social, and behavioral development of homeless children and how these factors impede academic achievement, little has been done from the perspectives of homeless children and their families. This study provides a voice for homeless children and their families as they share their experiences with schooling.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Why Qualitative Research?

I chose a qualitative method of research as I sought to understand the social phenomenon of homelessness, as it relates to accessing schooling and child care, from the perspectives of those involved. Using a qualitative case study approach, I explored children's experiences in schools and child care centers, and the obstacles that restrict vulnerable families' access to high-quality child care and school intervention programs. I further investigated what interventions and services were helpful to parents and children. I came to know the realities of homeless children and their families through interactions and explorations of the participants' views (Glesne, 2006). In order to tell the individual stories of homeless children and their families, I used a narrative approach with particular emphasis on the verbatim and concrete principles of qualitative research (Spradley, 1980; Polakow, 1993; Rivera, 2008). Using the participants' own words and providing concrete descriptions help to tell the stories of the struggles and triumphs of homeless children and their families' experiences with schooling, a story that so desperately needs to be told.

There has been a significant amount of research involving the statistical realities of homeless children and their families accessing schooling and child care; and those data are updated regularly by major research and advocacy organizations such as the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAECHY), the National Coalition for the Homeless (NCH), and the National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP). There are not many significant qualitative studies that have examined homeless families' experiences. Janice Molnar (1990), Sharon Quint (1994), and Ellen Bassuk (1990, 2001) are among the researchers who have examined the effects of homelessness on young children

using qualitative approaches. The work of these individual researchers has focused on the effects of homelessness as it relates to health, development, educational achievement, educational change, or policy implication. However, little has been done to illuminate the individual perspectives and experiences of homeless children and their families in relation to schooling.

<div align="center">*Research Design and Data Collection*</div>

This qualitative study, situated in southeast Michigan, involved in-depth interviewing and participant observation (see attached Human Subjects Review Committee Approval, Appendix A). I initially interviewed and/or conducted focus groups with ten current or formerly homeless parents who have had contacts in the past five years with a local non-profit community agency that provides support for homeless families in the area. From these interviews and focus groups I chose to concentrate on two particular families that were currently working with the local non-profit community agency that provides support for homeless families in the area and were having very different experiences with their children's schooling. The parents of the two focus families were interviewed regarding their perceptions of their children's classrooms and the supports that the school had provided. With parental permission, I also interviewed two of the focus families' elementary and middle school children about their perceptions of what helps them achieve success in school. Additionally, seven children were observed in two elementary schools, grades kindergarten, second, third, fourth, and fifth, to further understand their daily school realities. One of the teachers of the children was interviewed, and six teachers engaged in informal discussions, sharing what they believed to be obstacles and supports for the children.

To further understand the school realities of children, I interviewed, with parental consent, three elementary students who participated in an after-school tutoring program through the local non-profit community agency that provides support for homeless families in the area, and I asked about their perceptions of their schools. In addition, I conducted a focus group with two parents who had children at the child care center run by the same local agency about their access to child care and their hopes and fears for their children as they enter formal schooling. With their consent, I interacted and had informal "interview" conversations with their two preschool children. Finally, eleven preschool and elementary teachers in southeast Michigan who have had homeless students in their classrooms, schools, or centers, and administrators and caseworkers affiliated with the local non-profit agency that provides support for homeless families in the area were interviewed and/or participated in focus groups about their perceptions of obstacles and supports.

The Interviews and Observations

As I interviewed adult participants, the interviews were open-ended initially, followed by semi-structured interview questions. As I sought to hear their stories and perspectives, I asked questions only to clarify events or experiences or to acquire further detail. Interview questions for parents involved their accounts of their children's experiences with schooling, focusing on what the school did or could have done to help their child and family during their episode of homelessness. Additionally, parents shared what they believed to be the main barriers for their family and specifically for their children in school. Interviews with elementary aged children were open-ended and informal and took place during a play activity to create a more relaxed atmosphere. While building with Legos, playing cards, and so on, I asked the children how they felt about school, what they liked and did not like. As they

shared their likes and dislikes I tried to elicit from the children the key people in their lives that helped them feel successful in school and how they felt when they moved to different schools. "Interviews" with preschool children were informal interactions during play. As I played with the children I asked them to tell me what they liked to do when they were in school and out of school. I also observed the children as they played and interacted with other children and their teachers. Furthermore, ethnographic classroom observations took place in two different elementary schools, focusing on seven of the children from the two focus families.

The families volunteered to participate and signed consent forms informing them that their confidentiality would be protected at all times and that they could choose to withdraw at any time. After parental consent was obtained, I read oral consent protocols to the younger children and gave written ones for elementary aged children who could read. All interviews were audio taped, and the tapes and the transcripts were kept in a locked filing cabinet. Upon completion of the thesis all tapes and transcripts will be destroyed. Participant confidentiality was protected at all times, and fictitious names were assigned to participants. Site confidentiality was protected at all times, and fictitious names were assigned to all sites.

Analysis of Data

Once all interviews and observations were completed within a two-month period, the data were written up as case studies. The two focus families' experiences were summarized and juxtaposed to show what harmed and what helped the children and their families. The experiences of the families at the child care center, the additional elementary children, and teachers and administrators were summarized and intertwined to show the effects of homelessness on children and families. All data were examined for themes and linked to

current literature and research. The emergent themes were analyzed for the developmental and educational impacts and implications for homeless children and their families. Dissemination of thesis findings will serve as recommendations for area school districts and school personnel to aid in working with homeless children and their families. Thesis findings will also be disseminated in the form of recommendations that will be presented to the local non-profit community agency that provides support for homeless families in the area.

Chapter 4: The Light-Powers Family: Struggling to Survive

In this chapter I focus on the school experiences of the children in the Light-Powers family. This blended, African American family has struggled with maintaining and affording permanent housing for the last two years. Prior to becoming homeless, single mother Sherrie lived on her own for two years after separating from her children's father. Employed as a nurse aid and earning minimum wage, Sherrie struggled to afford the rent on various apartments for herself and her three daughters, ten-year-old Happi, nine-year-old Ann, and eight-year-old Melissa. Sherrie soon began dating Tim and the two married. At first the double income made it easier for Sherrie to provide for her children, but when Tim lost his job, this left the family with an inadequate income once again. It became increasingly difficult to afford rising rent payments, and Sherrie and Tim moved in with family for some time, eventually entering a homeless shelter with Sherrie's three girls. Adding to their struggles, Sherrie lost her job and became pregnant, leaving the family with no source of income. Another source of stress occurred when Tim's three children, eleven-year-old Denise, eight-year-old David, and six-year-old Daniel, came to live with them in the shelter.

Placed in the Housing First Program, the family moved from a shelter to a subsidized home and they also received services from Green Acres, the local non-profit community agency that provides support for homeless families in the area. This government program, Housing First, allows for subsidized family housing for two years before the family is expected to obtain housing at fair market value. As the end of their two years quickly approaches, the family is presently less stable than they were two years ago. Tim is able to work odd jobs that keep the family afloat for a short time, but has been unable to find permanent work. Sherrie recently found employment as a nurse aide but could not continue

due to lack of transportation. As the family situation deteriorates, Sherrie has slipped into a state of depression, fear, and anxiety. Samantha, their caseworker from Green Acres describes the family circumstances, "Their situation is unique. They came in more stable and due to so many factors, it has gotten graver over time." Adding to their troubles Sherrie and Tim believe something is terribly wrong at the children's schools but feel somewhat paralyzed as they have no other options for schooling at this point.

Sherrie

Sherrie, mother of Happi, Ann, and Melissa, and stepmother of Denise, David, and Daniel, relates her concerns about the children's experiences in their current school grades. Many of the children are having difficulties in school and Sherrie's gut feeling is that something is wrong in the classrooms. Since the family does not have a car and the public bus in the neighborhood has limited service hours, transportation is an issue for Sherrie and prohibits her from taking an active role in her children's classrooms. Sherrie has communicated with both the principal and her children's teachers that though she wants to be involved in her children's education, transportation is an issue. She has not heard anything from her children's teachers in response to these concerns.

> I'm telling you I can work a phone, and I'll call and call and call and I'll say if I can
> do this by phone, can I do this by e-mail, can I fax you this or whatever. I will try to
> do everything I can to be involved without actually having to be there because I don't
> have the means to do that. Like I explained to the principal Mr. Michaels, it's not that
> I don't want to be here or that I'm not concerned about what's going on, it's that I
> don't have the transportation for it. I can't and your school is so far out that if I
> wanted to walk I couldn't do it… I asked them if they could do a phone conference
> with me, I have yet to hear from anyone.

With many of her children experiencing difficulties, Sherrie is frustrated by the lack of response she receives from the children's school. She knows that her children are sent to the office regularly for behavior issues, and would like to be an equal partner with the teachers and principal to problem solve and resolve these concerns. Sherrie wants her children to succeed in school; however, without the opportunity to be actively involved in their education, her hopes for their academic and emotional success in school diminish. Sherrie relates that the school staff does not empathize with the hardships associated with homelessness, which present barriers to her desired involvement in her children's education. Nor does the staff provide a supportive approach to facilitate her participation. When she resisted placing David on medication for ADHD, his teacher avoided communication with her. Despite his frequent misbehavior and trips to the school office, Sherrie was not contacted by David's teacher to help with these issues. Yet, now that she has acquiesced to the medication, she hears from David's teacher when he exhibits compliant behavior. Urged by the principal to medicate him for ADHD, Sherrie explains:

> My son David, he was getting in a lot of trouble but he is ADHD so we had to get his medication right. Since we got his medication right he's been very good, they actually sent a letter of praise home for him. His teacher did call and say it made a difference, the principal, I was talking about a different student and he let me know that David is a totally different kid and doing good.

As a condition of the Housing First program, the Light-Powers family is involved with Green Acres. This agency provides many support services including after school programs and transportation to these programs from the children's school. The school personnel are aware of this involvement that the family has with Green Acres, yet there

seems to be a lack of sensitivity to the plight of the family. School activities and supplies that have related costs are extremely difficult on the family's part. Often times the children are left out of these activities, thus diminishing their overall feeling of school inclusion and success. Sherrie explains:

> I mean, it's just, it's really like some of the field trips they go on, for example, Happi and Denise have field trips next week… I'm not sure if they'll be able to go. I don't have the money for it. They didn't get to take their school pictures because I didn't have the money for it. Those things, the pictures and stuff like that …the kids are upset about it cause everyone else in the school is doing this and…Yeah, you know, [they feel] really left out…When they did the science project, my kids couldn't get the cardboard they needed cause the cardboard was only $2 but when you go two times six, that's $12. I just didn't have it, you know, I was, if I do have $12 then we're looking at tissues and dishwashing liquid, I'm not even thinking about what's going on at that school, so a lot of things they do miss out on because I don't have it…it's just me and my husband doing things on our own…It's hard.

Despite the school personnel's knowledge of the family's economic and housing struggles, they have participation expectations for the family that are often completely unrealistic. Due to the family's transportation and financial difficulties, the Light-Powers children are frequently absent from school activities or events. The school's lack of compassion and cooperation in dealing with the factors which impede the family's participation in these activities results in the exclusion of the Light-Powers children and denial of the same opportunities to participate in school events as their peers.

Sherrie voices concerns that she has regarding her children's classrooms, in particular the classrooms of eight-year-old Melissa and nine-year-old Ann. She feels that neither teacher is helpful or supportive. Melissa has been sent to the office on a daily basis for incidents that Melissa denies when she gets home. Sherrie believes that something is wrong as Melissa has always been a truthful child who enjoys going to school.

Melissa seems to be having a little bit of trouble now, I don't know if it's just the teacher or if it's something she's going through with behavior problems or something but for the last couple of weeks she's been getting in trouble...Yesterday they called and I guess she was told to find her science book, she couldn't find it, so they said that she told the teacher, "You find it." When she came home she said that ain't what she said, she asked her could she help her find it. And I didn't really put her in any punishment or anything 'cause one thing about Melissa is she's very honest…she's [Melissa] even told me that she's [Ms. Adams] hit her before…That's what Melissa told me; I let the principal know about it and he's, "Oh no, Miss Adam's not like that, she's one of the nicest teachers we have." But Melissa's not saying so, and this is like the first time I've had any qualms out of Melissa when it comes to school.

Everyday Sherrie feels that she sends Melissa to a classroom where her honesty and integrity is challenged and her physical well-being is threatened. When she calls to report her concerns, she is dismissed without any inquiry. Sherrie feels trapped since with limited resources, there are presently no other options for Melissa's schooling. With each passing day Sherrie's instincts tell her that this is not the best environment for her children.

Sherrie discusses the problems that nine-year-old Ann is having regarding homework. Sherrie explains that she has made a habit of checking Ann's homework on a daily basis

since Ann had problems with prompt submission of assignments in her previous school. She states that currently Ann's teacher, Ms. Jewel, does not send homework home for Ann and, when she does, the expectations for completion are unrealistic. With limited financial resources, Sherrie is unable to provide extra materials needed to complete homework projects and provide transportation to extracurricular events. Ms. Jewel seems to lack sensitivity when it comes to the plight of the Light-Powers family and gives assignments without thinking of the constraints Ann has in completing them.

> They only have homework when it's some big project that the whole school is doing… Ann's teacher has got Ann thinking that everything that school do she has to do or she's going to get an E for it. Like they just had a concert at one of the middle schools…and all the kids asked if they could go and I'm like, "No, we don't have a car, we can't go…" Ann was worried about it. The day of it, she almost got herself in trouble 'cause I just couldn't take it no more, "Stop cryin' and go." I don't know. Ann's teacher giving her homework where she has to do research on the computer, at the time, I didn't have a computer. Couldn't get her to the library on the weekends or during the week because during the week the last bus run here is six and she doesn't get home until close to five almost. So getting to the library, yeah maybe we can get there, but there's no getting back home, and on weekends there's no bus over here.

When Ann continually failed to bring homework home, Sherrie contacted Ann's teacher, Ms. Jewel, expressing her concern. Much to Sherrie's surprise, Ms. Jewel provided a demeaning response. It appears that Ms. Jewel has preconceived notions about Ann and her family.

So I got a hold of her teacher and her teacher said, "Well no I don't send her

homework because I don't know if she's getting help at home," and instantly I kinda

wanted to say, "What in the, what did you say to me?" But I thought well that

wouldn't be the right response to give to the lady but after I hung up the phone with

her I told my husband, "Like well you know she kinda made me feel like we're not

good parents as far as their schooling goes." 'Cause what kind of response is that, she

was like, "I make her do it when she has free time." Yeah and that's why I was like,

"So you're telling me while the other kids are enjoying their free time, you're making

Ann sit and do her homework, when if in fact you was sending homework home and

she was getting it in, that wasn't the correct response for you to do, you should have

contacted me and said 'Hey, Ann's not getting her work done.' "

Despite Sherrie's attempts to be involved in her children's education, Ms. Jewel

makes the decision that Sherrie is incapable or unwilling to provide her daughter with

guidance and assistance, and her parenting is judged to be negligent. So Ms. Jewel punishes

Ann by taking away her free time and opportunity to be with her peers. What is a parent left

to do when she tries to be involved in her children's education despite limited resources, and

all of her efforts are dismissed as inadequate by school personnel?

Pain, Punishment, and Compliance at Park Hill Elementary

Park Hill Elementary School is located within a school district that has emerged from

its rural, agrarian roots into a suburban community. It is one of six elementary schools within

the district composed of kindergarten through fifth grade. The school's racial and ethnic

composition is primarily Caucasian (77%) with a small percentage of African American

(22.3%) and Hispanic (0.7%) students. Located within a predominantly working class

community, more than half of Park Hill Elementary students come from economically

disadvantaged households (56.2%). Nearly half of the student body receives free (45.6%) or reduced-price lunch (10.6%). The teaching staff is predominantly Caucasian and more than half hold a Master's Degree (63.1%).

As I enter the office of Park Hill Elementary School around lunchtime on a spring afternoon, I notice that the office is lined with students sitting around randomly. While I have made an appointment to observe in the Light-Powers children's classrooms, I am informed by the principal that I cannot get into the classrooms for another forty-five minutes as the children are at lunch, so I settle into a chair. Four of the students in the office, three African American and one Caucasian, are visible from where I sit. However, a door that opens to a back office reveals additional students. While it appears that the students are here for discipline reasons, they sit about the office with nothing to work on or to read. The two boys sitting next to me are totally ignored as they entertain each other by throwing a ball back and forth. Further, the secretary continues to close the door to the back office, making the students seated in there completely out of sight. When one of the students questions the secretary if he can go have lunch with his class, she tells him, "No," without ever looking up.

Upon more careful examination I find Melissa seated in the back office, aimlessly staring up at the ceiling while clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth. A fifth-grade teacher, I later find out to be Denise's teacher, enters the office and questions Melissa, "Are you supposed to be making noises with your mouth?" While Melissa tries to respond she is interrupted by the teacher, "Did you hear me ask a question? When I get a response from a student it's because I ask a question." Melissa looks perplexed at the absurdity of the teacher's statement. Eventually the principal emerges from his office with an African American boy who appears to be about seven years old. The boy attempts to follow Mr.

Michaels, but is stopped short as he is reprimanded by Mr. Michaels. "You're supposed to be on the wall, get over there now. Put your hand on the wall. You know my rule, twenty minutes, no talking, no moving." The boy attempts to do as he is told but the task seems impossible for a young child. As the boy squirms with his hand on the wall he is coldly reminded by the secretaries, "Get over there. Get your hand on that brick." The fifth grade teacher also chimes in scolding the boy in a harsh manner, "I hear you. You want to come to my classroom for the rest of the day? You don't want to come to my classroom. There are strict rules." As the fifth grade teacher notices me looking at her, her tone and demeanor change abruptly. She walks over to the boy sitting next to me and begins, "Hi sweetie…." Her shift, however, seems forced and insincere. Thirty-five minutes later the little boy holding the wall is told to go back to his classroom by Mr. Michaels.

An unkempt-looking, obese man in a tie-dyed T-shirt enters the office followed by a slight, six or seven-year-old African American girl. I assume that the man is a lunch and recess supervisor. The girl walks behind the man with her shoulders hung down and a look of despair on her face. Despite the warm weather she is dressed in a turtle neck and jeans cinched tight with a belt, both the shirt and pants are much too large for her. She appears to be disheveled and dirty, leading me to believe that the girl is extremely impoverished. The large man boasts her offense for everyone in the office to hear.

> Happy Friday, I brought you a present. Stealing, she bought a cookie and put another
> one in her pocket at the same time. The lunch ladies requested she not be in the snack
> line the rest of the year. Then she poured milk on her plate so it would spill all over. I
> made her give the cookies back.

The girl tries to explain that it was an accident but she is interrupted by both the large man and Mr. Michaels. Her eyes fill with tears as I exit the office. Mr. Michaels stops me, showing me a note from Melissa's teacher, Ms. Adams, that Melissa was throwing things and bothering other students. "I sent her back to class so you could observe her, but she's been having problems not doing her work, with peer relationships and being defiant. I'm not sure if you'll see this because she knows you, but this has been a problem." Mr. Michaels further questions my affiliation and reason for observing the Light-Powers children. "Are you involved with Green Acres? What is it? Is it through the University?" I answer Mr. Michael's questions and leave the office. As I walk down the hallway to Melissa's classroom, I hear a parent volunteer working at the book fair scream at two children who come up to look at books, "We're closed now, go!" There seems to be a culture of disrespect within the school and this disrespect is echoed in the classrooms.

Pain and Condemnation: Melissa Makes Her Way

As I enter Ms. Adams' first and second grade classroom, she doesn't acknowledge my presence, and I take a seat in the back of the classroom. The classroom is disorderly with trash on the floor and every shelf and surface cluttered with books and papers. Ms. Adams sits in the front of the room conducting a math lesson with her second grade students sitting on the floor in front of her, while the first grade students sit at their tables given the instruction to read quietly to themselves. The first graders seem starved for attention as many come up to me wanting to show me their papers and read to me. As she conducts the math lesson Ms. Adams never leaves her chair and she stops continually to correct the first graders who chat amongst themselves. Melissa lies on the floor as Ms. Adams teaches; it seems she is not paying attention. However, when Ms. Adams asks her, "What is the math problem we could make?" Melissa answers appropriately. Ms. Adams continues to go over the answers to

the math worksheets but does little explaining for those kids who did not have the correct answer. As the math lesson ends and Ms. Adams directs the kids to return to their seats, Melissa is the last to return to her seat. She walks slowly to her seat on her knees, sucking her thumb as she goes.

Melissa's desk is separated from the other students as she sits alone at a table. Three other students, two African American boys and one Caucasian boy, are also separated from the rest of their classmates. These four children are marginalized in the classroom by their physical placement and Ms. Adam's apparent contempt for them. Their behavior mirrors that of their classmates on this warm spring afternoon, chatty and sometimes off task, yet they are inflicted with punishments that do not seem to be appropriate responses for their offenses. Ms. Adams' threats linger over these children, forbidding them from feeling as equal participants in classroom activities. As they attempt to work she publicly reminds them of their place within the classroom.

> I'm calling your dad as soon as we're done…after math you're going to the office…I
> don't want to hear from you, you never tell the truth…you do lazy man's
> work…you're not going to be ready for third grade…you'll be suspended on
> Monday.

Ms. Adams' treatment of these children is imitated by the other children in the classroom. It is evident that they have learned that blaming these children for problems allows them to escape the infliction of Ms. Adams' punishments on themselves.

As the students take out their draft books, Melissa crawls underneath her table with a picture book and resumes sucking her thumb. Ms. Adams begins discussing the children's writing assignment, completely oblivious to Melissa's location. Sometime later, as she makes

her way to Melissa's area of the classroom she realizes Melissa is off task and raises her voice. "Are you going to get your draft book or not?" Melissa gets up, picking up her draft book, and Ms. Adams continues, "You're not listening, Melissa put that down and go sit in the black chair." Resentfully Melissa moves to the black chair on the other side of the room without her draft book, where she remains for the remainder of the writing period. Separated even further from her classmates, Melissa once again sucks her thumb and quietly whispers to me, "Will you sit by me?"

The end of the day quickly approaches and the students gather their backpacks and belongings and return to their seats. Ms. Adams bellows, "Heads down. If you want funny money your heads better be down." With this command Melissa turns to me and comments, "Don't nobody care about funny money. [Pointing to Ms. Adams] She's mean. I hate her and I hate this school. Can I go with you?" As Melissa finishes packing up her belongings Ms. Adams abruptly instructs her and the three other boys on Melissa's side of the room, "Go to the office and wait for the bus lines." Without a goodbye or acknowledgment of their departure from Ms. Adams, the four children leave the classroom for the day. While the other children participate in the passing out of funny money, Melissa is once again excluded from this classroom event.

As the other children exit the classroom, Ms. Adams talks candidly with me about Melissa and her "issues." She explains that Melissa is part of the neighborhood that was redistricted to Park Hill Elementary School. When Ms. Adams speaks of "that neighborhood" she is referring to a neighborhood of predominantly low-income African American people. Her body tenses as she describes the neighborhood's feelings regarding the redistricting. There is a sense of scorn in her voice.

It reminds me of back in the old days. These people feel like, they can move us but we're not going to do anything for these white people. They take their kids to the Dollar Store for workbooks so they stay on par and don't have to do anything when they're here.

From the first day of her arrival at Park Hill Elementary School, Melissa has been set up to fail. Ms. Adams' indifferent treatment to the struggles Melissa's family has had with obtaining housing along with her hostility for the inhabitants of Melissa's neighborhood appear to deny Melissa the equal opportunities she is entitled to in a public school.

Ms. Adams goes on to reveal that Melissa was calm and quiet when she first came to Park Hill Elementary School in the middle of the year. Despite her initial demeanor in the classroom, Ms. Adams believes that Melissa was always a behavior problem. "She already was a behavior problem, she had these issues before, she just didn't know any kids." Ms. Adams seems unmoved by the fact that Melissa had to begin yet another school in the middle of the year. Further, she does not question or investigate why the family has been so transient. This is yet another indication of the indifferent treatment that homeless families suffer at Park Hill Elementary School. Ms. Adams recalls a time where Melissa brought in a crocheted blanket and presented it to Ms. Adams, "This is a present for you." Ms. Adams laughs as she scoffs at the gesture, "Is there smallpox on it? I leave it right there on that shelf because I know she stole it. Soon her mom will be asking where it is so I keep it right there on the shelf." Ms. Adams points to the shelf that contains the blanket. The blanket sits on the shelf above Ms. Adams' desk with papers and books piled on top of it. Despite Melissa's best efforts to gain approval and acceptance from her teacher, her efforts are thwarted. Ms.

Adams appears to lack the sensitivity and conscience to realize what a colossal gesture it was for a child who has experienced homelessness to give up one of her few coveted possessions.

Ms. Adams continues her discussion as she moves on to what she believes is wrong with Melissa and her family. Completely dismissing the contacts Sherrie has tried to make with her, Ms. Adams asserts that the family does not care about school and makes no effort to be involved.

> Melissa has average intelligence, she could do OK but her parents don't come to anything, conferences, open house. They don't come unless there is a reward, like the carnival, there were a bunch of baskets that were raffled…There is no parental support, they haven't shown up once…I gave her all threes on her report card. I based it all on performance rather than ability.

Despite Sherrie's efforts, she is cast by Ms. Adams as a parent who doesn't care about Melissa's education. For Ms. Adams, Melissa and her family are part of "that neighborhood" and "those people" who are less deserving of the benefits of schooling than other children and their families. This attitude of otherness is echoed in Ms. Adams treatment of Melissa and in her unwillingness to meet Melissa's basic and educational needs. Even though Ms. Adams denies Melissa the opportunities to fully participate in many of the classroom's events and activities, she is evaluated on her report card for what she fails to produce, rather than what she knows. Melissa has been written off as a human being who does not deserve respectful and dignified treatment. Ms. Adams comments, "I don't know if these kids will even be here next year. I guess it depends if they keep up on their rent, and you know they never do."

The Land of No Joy: Ann and David Learn Compliance

Ann and David are both in third grade classrooms that are adjacent to each other, and both classrooms share many activities together. As I enter David's classroom, I find David on task and quietly sitting in his chair. Ms. Pryor, David's teacher, is giving the students a spelling test and moves quickly through the words, leaving many children behind. With a rather annoyed expression, Ms. Pryor continues with the spelling test, providing the students with the words in sentences that are confusing and do not convey the word's meaning. When Jason, an African American boy, comments out loud that the sentence doesn't make sense, Ms. Pryor coldly responds, "Jason, you have a check." She adds his name to the list of "bad kids" she holds in her hand. Jason slumps down in his desk which is located near Ms. Pryor's desk, isolated from his peers. Adam, an African American boy, speaks up to say much the same thing as Jason. In the same manner Ms. Pryor responds, "Adam out." Adam indignantly leaves his desk, also isolated from his peers, and responds, "I've been waiting to leave this room." In contrast, when David raises his hand to comment on the sentence like Jason and Adam, Ms. Pryor responds, "David that was good now you raised your hand." As Ms. Pryor collects the children's spelling tests, David notices some crumbs on the floor and quickly moves to the closet, grabbing the broom and dustpan to clean up the mess. As he sweeps the floor he looks back to Ms. Pryor to see if she has noticed his good deed. Ms. Pryor finally acknowledges my presence commenting about David, "The medicine has made such a difference, it's terrific. He's such a different kid."

Upon the completion of the spelling test the students in Ms. Pryor's class prepare for Ms. Jewel's class to come over and watch a movie. Some of the students have earned the reward of a movie for good behavior and the completion of assignments, and will be allowed

to watch the movie. Those who have not earned this privilege move to Ms. Jewel's room to just sit, with nothing to do. Ms. Jewel enters stone-faced with some of her students, including Ann, following behind her. The students move about the room, sitting by their friends. What should be an enjoyable reward for the students becomes a test of compliance. There is the threat of going next door that hangs over the students. As a student passes out bags of popcorn, Ms. Jewel yells, "Do I need more people in the other room because I don't think you are watching or listening to this? Turn around." Ann seems tense as she continually looks to see where Ms. Jewel and Ms. Pryor are located and whispers to the friend sitting next to her, "Be quiet!" as Ms. Jewel comes near. Without warning Ms. Jewel sends Ann's friend to the classroom next door booming, "You're only supposed to have one bag of popcorn, go!" The little girl tries to explain that someone gave her the extra bag, but Ms. Jewel doesn't listen and yells even louder, "Go!" As Ann's friend walks to the other classroom, a look of despair comes over Ann's face as she watches her leave. Ann hangs her head as tears well up in her eyes. For the remainder of the movie Ann stares at the floor and picks at her fingernails.

Compliance is viewed as a positive asset in the eyes of Ms. Pryor and Ms. Jewel. While David and Ann do not emerge as behavior problems within the classrooms, it is because they have learned the unspoken classroom rules; to sit quietly and speak when spoken to. If they comply, they escape the cruel and harsh punishment of their teachers. While the school mission statement reads, "…Our purpose is to create a safe, secure environment….," Ms. Pryor and Ms. Jewel create an environment where fear of punishment and public humiliation is the driving force to comply. Their classrooms are not safe havens that provide consistency and nurturance for children, specifically those experiencing chaos

and trauma. Ms. Jewel and Ms. Pryor exhibit erratic, punitive behavior that, to an outside observer, follows no particular rhyme or reason. Without exhibiting robotic compliance, the students are subject to punishment.

Upon subsequent visits to Park Hill Elementary School access to the Light-Powers children's classrooms became more restrictive, despite parental consent. Mr. Michaels did not return my phone calls when I called to set up observations, and ultimately left it up to the school secretary to arrange times and dates with me. Upon arrival at the school Mr. Michaels made me wait over an hour in the office before he allowed me to enter classrooms. He addressed me without ever looking up or smiling. The classroom teachers seemed annoyed by my attendance, often failing to acknowledge my presence. At one point Ms. Adams denied me access to her classroom, stopping me in mid-tracks as I entered saying, "I can't have you in here today. We're doing assessments and you can't be in here." Unsure of what changed in their minds since my initial visits, I complied with their requests and wishes and tried to stay out of their way. It is clear that Park Hill Elementary School's mission statement that begins, "We, the entire staff, believe that every student can learn..." only applies to some kids— those who look, act, and come from homes and families that the staff deems suitable.

Chapter 5: The Brown-Miller Family: Building a Safety Net

In this chapter I focus on the school experiences of the children in the Brown-Miller family. This blended African American family has six children, ranging in age from their early twenties to age nine. The family, deeply impoverished, has struggled with obtaining permanent housing for the last six years. During this time the family has been homeless three times, moving in and out of shelters. When Sam and Lynn would obtain housing at fair market value, they were not able to sustain the household for prolonged periods of time. Throughout the family's frequent relocations, the children have moved in and out of many schools and school districts. Currently Sam and Lynn have moved from a shelter into a home through the Homeless Assistance Recovery Program (HARP), a form of Section 8 housing to promote long-term stability in permanent housing for homeless individuals. The family is experiencing a sense of stability that, up until this point, has been foreign to them. Sam and Lynn's two school-aged children, eleven-year-old Candice and nine-year-old Tommy, are now attending excellent and supportive schools, whose staff have worked hard to provide necessary services for the children as well as the family. In addition the family continues to work with Green Acres, the local non-profit community agency that provides support for homeless families in the area. Like never before, their future, despite extreme poverty, seems promising.

Sam

Sam, stepfather to the six Brown children, shares the children's experiences with schools they have attended in the past. While some of the schools have provided his children with positive, supportive experiences, some have left the children and the family feeling inadequate, like outsiders within the school walls. Although many of the schools may have

tried to be supportive of the family's situation and struggles, they possessed preconceived notions about homeless families. Sam recalls his feelings in one particular district.

> They were trying to be good or supportive to us, but you could feel it in the air. There was an air in that school, I don't know if it's just the people or what, but it seemed a little racist and I would say, yeah, towards homeless families…It was just little things they would say and how they would say it. Where I would stand there and they would stop talking to me and go talk to Samantha [caseworker through Green Acres], they would give her more respect than they would me. They would clarify things to her that they wouldn't do for me…sometimes these people don't have to say anything; they can just make you feel that way. Ain't my fault that you're homeless [school personnel's attitude toward Sam and his family].

The lack of respect that Sam discusses seems to be common in many schools, schools that do not recognize their responsibilities to educate homeless children. While many schools state that support and nurturing of children is their philosophy, this clearly does not extend to impoverished and homeless children. Many school personnel make value judgments regarding homeless families; these judgments are made evident in the treatment of the children and their families. Sam shares:

> Sometimes in that school situation, there's some people that really do knock you because you're homeless, some teachers…I had a conversation with a principal once…they tell you they are out to give support to homeless families, or homeless kids, but some of them put on a show that they care when they really don't. The kids feel that too. I mean, it's not their fault that they were homeless, having to move

around and all that. It impacts them too. When you find somebody that speaks against

the situation that you're in, like being homeless, yeah that hurts and it hurts the kids.

The trauma of homelessness is life-encompassing for children. Without the sensitivity

and compassion of school personnel, day-to-day occurrences in the school building can be

humiliating and devastating for homeless children. Sam goes on to talk about how the simple

act of receiving a hot lunch has been traumatic for his children.

Even in the lunch room…it's different for a homeless child… It's a bitch trying to get

a lunch in that lunch room, and especially, some staff members will make little snide

remarks at that child because they are in that boat. "Why didn't your parents fill out

that lunch form, all you homeless little brats," you know you hear things like that,

"You homeless little brats, you don't have this, you don't have that?"

This harsh treatment has devastating consequences for the children, leaving them with a

sense of fear and loathing of the school environment, the place where they are made to feel

less than human. Sam believes, however, that schools can truly be a source of support for

homeless families. Sam speaks about their caseworker from Green Acres, Samantha, and her

strong, supportive role for their family, "She's like part of the family. She makes things a

whole lot easier. She helps to make things a whole lot easier than it would have been without

her." He believes that schools, too, can be this support for homeless families.

I think if it was something that they could do, or should do, would be to maybe take

or have something set up in that school, maybe a group or a person, someone that

knows something about being homeless. That person, or group of people, would be

able to deal with that homeless family without any conflict from other people in that

school. If it was something like that it would be a big help. I think it would make

things a whole lot easier for everybody if it was a group inside the school or the

school district that really knew what it was like to be homeless and sit down and talk

to you and do things that were official for you and your family…their [homeless

children] attitudes change, when things are going right. As far as getting to school,

having transportation, a lunch, it makes a big difference for them and their

willingness to go to school.

Fortunately Sam and his family now experience this sense of support in both Tommy and

Candice's current schools.

Tommy and Candice attend schools that are some fifteen miles from their new home.

While the children began the year living in transitional housing near their current schools, the

family's procurement of more permanent housing through HARP required the family to

move outside of the school district. Sam recollects the ease with which Candice's school,

Sowell Middle School, arranged transportation, assuring that she would continue attendance

at the school.

The school really bent their backs getting her because they wanted her there, they

didn't want to see her miss school or anything. So they called and got transportation

set up for her with no problems. Which I thought was great. When we first started off

I never thought that would happen or that the school would even get involved but

they did… They made things comfortable for her so that she will come to school. I

think it really boosted her…willingness to want to go to school…There's some

stability now.

The support that Candice's school provides continues as they are sensitive to both the

family's needs and their limitations. The school and its personnel recognizes that the family

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needs and wants to be involved in Candice's education but are unable to attend conferences and Individualized Education Program meetings due to lack of transportation and child care for younger siblings. Without hesitation Sowell Middle School has responded to the family's needs.

> For one meeting the school social worker and teacher came out to the house so that Lynn could be a part of it and I thought that was really nice of both to come out. She [social worker] said it's no problem at all, we'll just do the meeting right here because we want her [Lynn] to be part of it.

By providing accommodations for the family's needs, Candice's school allows the family to be equal players in her education. Commitment on the part of the staff to Candice's education is well received by Sam and Lynn. While the reality of homelessness can often be a dehumanizing experience, Sowell Middle School allows Sam and Lynn to feel human again. These actions demonstrate Sowell Middle School staff's commitment to equality and inclusion for all children, and are not limited to simply the classroom teacher and the social worker. When Candice speaks of her favorite person at Sowell Middle School she names "the lunch lady." Sam explains that this cafeteria worker helped Candice with transportation to and from school and provided her with a new winter coat.

The support that the family receives from Candice's school is reaffirmed in the caring and committed actions taken by Tommy's school. Nine-year-old Tommy entered Earhart Elementary School significantly behind grade level in nearly all subject areas. Tommy's teachers rallied around both Tommy and the family, providing needed services and interventions to assist Tommy in his acculturation to the new school and promote his school success. Sam describes Tommy's success.

Earhart really bends their back...Earhart's staff, at that school, really bends backwards

to assist Tommy…they do some astronomical things, they do indeed…Let me put it

this way, Tommy has come a long way…the staff there though has brought him up to

a, I think right now he's at a third grade level, he's 8 years old. Before he went there,

he wasn't comprehending anything. Since he's been there they've really brought him

a long way…They really put forth an effort in being supportive and respecting your

rights and respecting the child's rights.

The staff at Earhart Elementary recognizes the needs of both Tommy and his family and

works to ensure that these needs are met. From Tommy's first day, the staff has worked to

identify Tommy's learning needs and have been attentive to his basic and social-emotional

needs as well. Tommy's teachers believe that once a child's basic needs are met, his/her

learning will follow. Sam explains:

They go as far as, the teachers mind you, go as far as taking cash out of their own

pockets to assist with shoes, clothing. They really go out of their way… When he

started at Earhart, he came in as like a little bully. That's not anymore, because of the

things that Ms. Byron, that's his teacher, [has done]. She sits and has conversations

with him about bullying… like they noticed when he chews gum he concentrates

better…They've been real sensitive I think to Tommy as a person. I think they make

him feel special, I really do. If you ever got to meet them you would see what I'm

saying.

Tommy does indeed feel special in his school. His family's struggles with homelessness have

not been a defining factor in Tommy's identity and place within the school. His classroom

teacher and the support staff have created an environment where Tommy feels safe and accepted, an environment where learning can truly occur.

Ms. Byron and Earhart Elementary: Equal Opportunity for All

Earhart Elementary School is located within a district that surrounds a large public university. It is one of twenty-one elementary schools within the district composed of kindergarten through fifth grade. The school's racial and ethnic composition is primarily Caucasian (68.2%) with a small percentage of African American (13.6%), Hispanic (6.1%), Asian/Pacific Islander (5.5%), Multi-Racial (5.5%), and American-Indian/Alaska Native (1.2%) students. Located within a primarily middle class community, only 17.6% of students come from economically disadvantaged households, with 16.1% receiving free lunch and 1.5% receiving reduced-price lunch. The teaching staff is largely Caucasian; more than half hold a Master's Degree (67.5%) and a small number hold Doctoral Degrees (5.5%).

As I enter Ms. Byron's second grade classroom on a spring afternoon, the students are stationed at various places around the room, eating snacks and helping Ms. Byron edit their classroom newsletter. Ms. Byron welcomes me into the classroom and tells me to make myself at home. Tommy sits comfortably in the room laughing and joking with the students sitting around him. It is evident from Tommy's behavior that he genuinely feels a part of this classroom. At first Tommy has no snack, but shortly thereafter the girl sitting next to Tommy breaks her granola bar in half, sharing with Tommy. Tommy smiles as his attention once again focuses on Ms. Byron. The students, providing information in their newsletter about their upcoming field trip to the zoo, freely give their opinions about the wording of the newsletter. Ms. Byron listens to their opinions and makes necessary changes. As Ms. Byron and the students complete the newsletter they move back to their seats and take out their math books.

The other students begin working on a math page and Ms. Byron walks over to Tommy. "Would you like to work on your math or your clipboard?" Tommy chooses math and Ms. Byron continues, "Do you know what to do or do you need help with directions?" Tommy indicates he needs help and Ms. Byron goes on, "Mr. Ed [high school helper] will help you, [Ms. Byron smiles] but I want you to do the math. Make sure you make your brain work." Ms. Byron winks at Tommy and he smiles back and begins working on his math. A few minutes later Tommy, without hesitation, takes out a piece of chewing gum and chews away happily as he completes his math assignment. Some of the other students notice Tommy's chewing, glancing slightly, and then continuing to work on their math. It is apparent that the other students accept that Tommy's gum chewing is what he needs to help him learn. Ms. Byron returns frequently to check on Tommy's progress, praising his work, "There you go, good work kid."

As math comes to a close, the students are instructed by Ms. Byron to clean their desks and then they will go out for some extra recess time. She moves about the room checking desks and notices Tommy shuffling books in his desk. With a wink and a smile she questions him, "You going to pass there, Brown?" Tommy smiles at her and continues cleaning his desk. Ms. Byron quietly whispers to me, real matter-of-fact, "He hoards stuff." Tommy's need to stockpile belongings as a response to his family's experiences with homelessness is recognized by Ms. Byron. He is not penalized or ostracized for this fact, Ms. Byron allows Tommy what he needs to feel safe and secure. After all the students go out for recess, I walk alongside Ms. Byron and she comments, "He's [Tommy] such a great kid. He's been a bit of stinker the last few days. I think it's because he knows he will be leaving. I told him he's been great all year, no reason to stop now." A few minutes later the Reading

Recovery teacher, Ms. Payne, comes to get Tommy for his lesson. Tommy obliges happily and Ms. Byron remarks while patting Tommy on the back, "He is the best kid about leaving recess."

Tommy settles into his chair in the Reading Recovery room and begins to read a predictable text. While Tommy struggles with the words, Ms. Payne smiles and encourages him to persist. Tommy tries hard to move through the text, but the words are difficult for him and he becomes frustrated. Ms. Payne touches his arms, "Don't get frustrated. Let's take a break." Tommy and Ms. Payne move to the closet and Tommy chooses a piece of candy. When he comes back to the table he is once again in good spirits and Ms. Payne reminds him, "Come on Tommy. I need you to focus these last two minutes." Tommy moves through the text, smiling as he finishes and giving Ms. Payne a high five. The satisfaction Tommy felt after completing the text appeared to be a source of delight for Ms. Payne as well.

As Tommy and I walk in the hall, I ask him to tell me about Ms. Byron. With an overwhelming smile he says, "I like her, she's fun, she's cool." As we make our way back to Ms. Byron's classroom, Tommy checks in with Dr. Smith, a special education teacher consultant. As Tommy goes to get his work to show her, Dr. Smith smiles saying, "He's made a lot of progress this year." Tommy returns and Dr. Smith looks over his work admiring what he has completed. As Dr. Smith continues checking Tommy's work, he picks up word cards and attempts to create a sentence. A bit frustrated Tommy says, "I can't do this." Dr. Smith looks up removing her glasses, "What do you mean you can't do it? I don't want to hear you can't do it." As Tommy makes the sentence and reads it to Dr. Smith she bumps fists with him, smiles and says, "Good job!" Dr. Smith and Tommy walk over to a shelf and Tommy picks up a Lunchables nachos snack for his cab ride home. Dr. Smith hugs

Tommy on his way out and tells him to have a great weekend. With a grin from ear to ear he returns to Ms. Byron's classroom to collect his things and leave for the day. Similarly, Ms. Byron puts her arm around his shoulders, "Have a good weekend, OK?" Tommy leaves the classroom, joking and laughing, and sharing some of his nacho chips with his classmates.

After the students leave, Ms. Byron talks about Tommy, his accomplishments, his struggles, and her fears for his school placement next year. When I initially called to arrange the observation, Ms. Byron questioned if it was known where Tommy would be attending school the following school year as she wanted to talk to that teacher before the end of the year. Ms. Byron has recognized Tommy's recent behavioral problems as an indication of his apprehension and insecurity about leaving Earhart Elementary. Likewise, Ms. Byron is unsure about what Tommy's future will bring and is concerned for his well-being and continued academic success. These genuine concerns of Ms. Byron are evident as she talks, discussing what has been helpful and harmful to Tommy's school success. When asked about what she believes has helped Tommy succeed at Earhart Elementary, Ms. Byron responds:

> Feeling safe. The classroom environment. He's really safe to be who he is, where he is, and that it's a good thing. Everybody is where they are and that's important to me no matter what grade I'm at…So they [her students] know that each kid has their own thing, and that's trying to make them better and that you care about them and they're safe and all that. I think more than that, it's knowing you really do [care about them]. I think kids know when people don't…I feel good when the kids feel successful and they feel safe.

Without taking credit, Ms. Byron discusses the culture of her classroom, a place where all students flourish because they are free to be themselves. The children are challenged to work

hard, being the best they can be, but Ms. Byron has created a safety net within the classroom that catches them when they fall. Armed with the knowledge that his teacher and classmates care about him and want him to succeed, Tommy has experienced incredible growth. Although he is significantly behind his peers academically, their respectful treatment of Tommy mirrors the example Ms. Byron provides for them daily. Ms. Byron explains, "I mean they are constantly helping him… no one ever mocks him…and he's really good about, 'Can Joe help me or this person help me?' " Tommy feels safe to show his vulnerabilities as he knows that his peers truly care about him.

In addition to creating a classroom environment conducive to learning, Ms. Byron also recognizes the unique needs Tommy and his family may possess as they have struggled with homelessness. Ms. Byron has created a nurturing, caring relationship with Tommy, and in turn he feels uninhibited about expressing his needs to her.

> Tommy does seem to feel stable and self-assured enough to ask for help…Cause he does, and more than almost any kid I know. "Miss B I need you to get me a backpack or I need a this, or that." Doesn't even blink an eye, and it's sweetly, very matter-of-fact but sweet when he says it…Sometimes he's quiet about it and you have to figure it out, "Where's your boots?" "I don't have any, he will tell you…" He doesn't usually have a snack, and a lot of times the kids will share or I'll have pears behind my desk and he'll say, "Those your pears, can I have one?"

Ms. Byron is aware of the financial struggles Tommy and his family face, but she also realizes that this is an issue for many families regardless of their living situation. When extra-curricular events that require money surface at school, Ms. Byron allows all her students to participate whether or not their families are able to afford it. She asserts:

Field trip money, at least with me, I will tell them right away, "If it's tight, don't worry about it I've got it," and I'll tell them that up front… A lot of things crop up where they have, like the fifth grade was trying to make money for the Humane Society so they had a bake sale and everything was a quarter to a dollar. "Ok, who doesn't have any money?" Like six kids, so the other kids will say, "Well I have a dollar I can give so-and-so, or I give them a dollar to anyone that doesn't have one." That's how we've done it all year long. You find out who doesn't have it and then make sure they get at least one thing. Then the kids watch me do that all year long, so they give money to the kids that don't. We just always make sure everyone has something.

There is a resounding aura of respect that resonates throughout Ms. Byron's classroom. She spends a great deal of time making sure her students feel safe and secure, and this is evident in everything she does. Financial struggles and hardships that children and their families may experience are not major concerns or defining characteristics for the children in the classroom, simply just the way life goes. All of the students are permitted to fully participate in everything the school has to offer as Ms. Byron and her students make sure everyone in the classroom is taken care of and resources provided for them.

While day-to-day communication with Tommy's family is not always possible, Ms. Byron values the role that Tommy's family plays in his life and education. She recognizes that homelessness is an all consuming, traumatic experience for families. Although their children's schooling is important to many homeless families, it is not always top priority, as meeting the family's basic needs comes first. Ms. Byron explains:

The expectations of teachers with homework and stuff like that can be really hard and

people can get really stringent about it. When you're in crisis, I don't know how

much time you have to sit down and make sure you are reading every night or going

through the homework packets and making sure the homework packets get done.

However, when Ms. Byron does have interactions with Tommy's family, she uses these

times as effectively as possible, utilizing each moment to further advance Tommy's

academic achievement. She views the family as an extension of herself, another support

system for Tommy.

When Sam comes and picks him up and stuff like that I'll sit down and talk with him,

show him what Tommy's reading and show him how I help Tommy decode stuff out

so if he helps Tommy to read some he can kind of know how I do it. And he's great

about it. He'll sit down and watch…I'll say make your eyes see the letters and so I

think he [Sam] really was watching that.

Ms. Byron has effectively helped Tommy experience school success this year at

Earhart Elementary School. While schools he has attended in the past have allowed his

family's periods of homelessness to define his place within the school, making him distinct

from his peers, Ms. Byron has done quite the contrary. Her ways of fostering a safe,

respectful, and nurturing environment seem to come intuitively for Ms. Byron. For many

teachers, creating this type of classroom is like treading on foreign territory. When asked if

she believes all school personnel can be adequately trained to meet the needs of homeless

children and their families, Ms. Byron responds:

I don't know that people always can cut people slack without passing judgments that

sometimes falls on the kids…I think that takes the right personalities. I don't know

that you can train that in to somebody, it's just who you are or who you are not…The

only thing you need to get through to those kids is to care about them. That's it,

there's no magic wand, there's no secret recipe, it's just to genuinely care about them

and make them feel like they can find success, whether it's at this level or that

level…So you have to show them that they are safe, they can find success and that

you genuinely like them and care about them…So once they know that you care

about them, and that they are safe right where they are at, you have them, they're

going to be fine.

Ms. Byron has, in fact, created an environment where Tommy feels safe and cared for;

indeed he is flourishing in his classroom. It is clear that Earhart Elementary School's mission

statement, "The Earhart School Community is committed to… an inclusive environment that

fosters sensitivity, awareness and respect for all," is affirmed in Tommy's daily interactions

with school personnel.

Chapter 6: What Homelessness Feels Like: A Tapestry of Perspectives

In this chapter I address the reality of homelessness for parents and their very young children as well as the supports that help families succeed. In addition to the perspectives of children and their parents, administrators and caseworkers associated with Green Acres, the local non-profit community agency that provides support for homeless families in the area, and a veteran teacher share their insights about homelessness based on the families with whom they have worked. The following individuals' perspectives will be shared:

Jamie, a homeless mother living in a shelter, and her preschool-aged daughter Katie

Robert, a homeless father in transitional housing, and his preschool-aged daughter Veronica

Danielle, ten-year-old participant in the after-school tutoring program run by Green Acres

Fran, an administrator from Green Acres

Genevieve, director of the Green Acres child care center, The Rainbow Center

Mary, child case worker for Green Acres

Paul, a veteran teacher of thirty-five years

The Personal Agony of Homelessness

Homelessness is a significant life trauma for children and their parents. The stress that accompanies trying to figure out what the family will do next and where they will go is internalized not only by the parents but the children as well. The effects of these stressors are seen in the children's emotional responses and often affect their immediate capacity to learn

in school. Further, as the parents struggle with providing the basic necessities for their

family, the amount of support they can provide for their children's education is often

reduced. Fran, an administrator for Green Acres, describes, "They [homeless parents] have

limited resources, but they have the same wishes, wants, and desires for their kids…It's

really an issue of their capacity…." As their parents try to attain some form of stability for

their children, the children are left with their own fears and insecurities. Fran further

explains:

> Homelessness is a trauma for kids, and I know that by the time families get into a
>
> shelter they have lived two years even, couch surfing from family and friends, and the
>
> kids don't have the stability they need, which messes with their whole developmental
>
> stuff which makes it harder for them to learn. They really aren't ready to learn a lot of
>
> the time, because they are also worried about where they're going to sleep that night,
>
> or worried about their mom because they know their mom and dad are worried about
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> where they are going to be the next night, so they can't really attend the way they'd
>
> like to attend.

The feelings that homeless children experience are manifested in their behavior in some way.

Whether the child acts out, exhibiting aggressive, angry behavior, or completely withdraws

from those around him or her, these are manifestations of the shame, fears, and frustrations

that are associated with the insecurity of homelessness. Genevieve, director of The Rainbow

Center, discloses:

> You see sometimes behavioral issues with the children…the children are
>
> overwhelmed by everything that's going on, the instability of the housing, parents
>
> that are emotionally strained everyday and maybe not having the time to sit down and

talk with them... Children sometimes don't have a lot of control over their emotions, haven't really learned how to regulate their emotions.

On a day-to-day basis, the range of emotions homeless children must cope with can be vast and ever-changing. In their young lives they must make sense of the fear and insecurity they feel. Jamie, Katie's mother, describes her four-year-old daughter's feelings of loss:

> Her life, because it's broke down so much, she doesn't have her own room right now, she doesn't have a TV in her room, these are little things she is used to having that she doesn't have right now. Little furniture, she used to have little furniture that was all over our house, little couches and chairs that were just hers, she was able to walk in the kitchen and have stuff that was just hers and get in the fridge whenever she wanted to, things that she can't do anymore…She's so disorganized right now…we had to get rid of our dog, she doesn't see grandma, she can't have sleepovers with her cousins and she doesn't understand….

Katie's feelings of loss that Jamie expresses are confirmed in my interactions with four-year-old Katie. As I read Katie a book about a birthday party, the characters in the book are swimming in a blow up pool in the backyard. As I begin to turn the page Katie stops me commenting, "I used to have a swimming pool." Katie is not alone when she grieves the loss of what used to be normal life. While I play with some of the preschool children during a recess time, we have a tea party in the sand box. Many of the children participate for various amounts of time. However, one little girl, Veronica, happily continues the tea party in the sand box even after everyone else has moved on to different activities. When I comment about how much she likes to play in the sand box she quietly responds, her eyes staring down

at the ground, "We don't have a sandbox where I live." In addition to the losses homeless children experience, they are distressed by their often constant movement as their families move in an out of shelters and transitional housing. Ten-year-old Danielle discusses how she has had to change schools twice this current school year. "[It makes me feel] kind of sad, 'cause I had just made new friends and I had to leave to a different school." All of these emotions affect a child's ability to learn in a school setting.

While the children experience a broad range of emotions, the parents of these children are also dealing with their own private hell. When they send their children to school, the private matter of their homelessness is often made public. For many families the reality of their life evokes feelings of shame. How will they be perceived as parents? Will people treat them differently because of their family's current situation? What about the children? These fears often lead parents to enter into relationships with school personnel with caution and even mistrust. Genevieve explains:

> I think sometimes they feel like you are going to blame them for their situation and there's the sense of shame and guilt about what part did I have in it…what does that mean to me as a parent, have I been doing what I'm supposed to be doing?

Some families choose to keep their family's homelessness a secret as they are fearful of the school's reaction. Basing their beliefs on those commonly held by the larger society, homelessness is a stigma, implying that somehow they are to blame, lacking "proper morals" or a work ethic. Hence, they choose to live the facade that everything is fine. Fran explains, "So many of our parents don't even want us to contact the school because they don't want the school to know they are homeless. They're afraid that the teacher is going to treat their children differently once they know that." While schools can be a supportive factor, helping

children and their families deal with the effects of homelessness, many families are not willing to take this gamble as they are sure their family and, more importantly, their children will lose.

Frequently the parents of homeless children feel inadequate within the culture of the school. Many times they themselves have had past negative experiences with their own schooling; thus, these experiences being crisp, often painful, memories. At one point in their lives they felt inadequate in school and now their current life situation once again stirs up those feelings of inadequacy. Genevieve talks about the school histories of many of the parents, which may also be barriers to positive home-school connections.

> Having a negative experience growing up, they don't perceive school as a positive
>
> thing for their child, so it makes it hard to have open communication and really build
>
> relationships…to see school as a positive thing and to see us as wanting to be helpful.
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> A lot of times trying to work through…understanding that we are here trying to help
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> and support, that school can be a good thing and we're all on the same page, I think is
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> a lot of things that we see, that we're working hard…so that the families [can]…get a
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> good experience from the school and take that on to other schools.

Building genuine partnerships between the home and the schools can be a positive, empowering experience for all involved. However, sincere attempts must be made on the part of all involved to enter into these relationships with the best interests of the children in mind. Meeting the needs of the children means accepting them and building upon that. Fran comments:

> So many of our parents feel less than [human] anyway with the school system…The
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> school talks a good game about partnerships, but I think it's on their terms. I don't

think they try to meet the parents and kids where they are. Some do, there are some

teachers who are really phenomenal who really will work hard with these kids and

their parents and really go out of their way to make things happen for the kids, but

that's the exception as opposed to the rule.

Additionally, Mary, the child case worker for Green Acres, adds, "Sometimes I feel like the

school itself in one full sweep wipes out everything we've accomplished with our kids." This

doesn't have to be the experience of homeless families and their children. Schools and

families can work together, meeting basic and educational needs, and building resiliency in

children to weather the storm of homelessness. Fran smiles, marveling at the flexibility and

determination that children possess, "The kids are really resilient…given what they need,

will do what they need to do… [given] the space, the structure, and the safety, they feel

nurtured and cared about…the kids really thrive."

<center>*What Makes Life a Little More Bearable*</center>

The classroom environment is an important component in the success children

experience in school. A chaotic lifestyle is normally a reality for children who are homeless.

Their lives are full of uncertainties, fears for their safety, and fears regarding their family's

sustainability. The classroom can be a safe, secure place for homeless children, providing the

stability and predictability they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. As

Fran thinks back on the many homeless children she has worked with throughout the course

of her career, she verbalizes what she believes they need to experience success:

School can be such a haven for them. It can be the one place that they go five days

out of the week, spend most their time there. They could get what they needed,

there's some consistency, encouragement, felt that they were liked and cared about,

these kids would thrive.

While the teacher is the most obvious person to create the safe haven in the classroom that Fran describes, the entire school community contributes to this environment on a daily basis. This process begins with a favorable reception of the child and his/her family, their strengths, weaknesses, fears, and hopes. Fran continues:

It's really about accepting the children where they are. If a child is not doing something there is a reason. The goal of children is around school, their life task is around learning. So if they're not, something is wrong…. [The environment should be] acceptance with high expectations. Nurturing and supportive, not punitive, not shaming, not putting down. Encouraging. That's what these kids need.

Many families know that education is the key for their child's success and they want them to do well in school. While the school must demonstrate compassion and commitment to homeless children, they must also challenge the children, pushing them to succeed. Similar to their housed peers, parents of homeless children want their children to learn and be held to high standards. Jamie, Katie's mother, states:

We just want our kids to do the best they can possibly do. It doesn't really matter if your kid is a pace behind…you have to think your kid is going to learn at that pace…a kid should be able to go into the classroom and learn where they are at what focuses they need to be on and what they can do to improve…I don't want her [Katie] to be held to different expectations. I'd like them to understand that she might be a little more emotional, a little more unstable than the other children, at this point. I don't want them to expect lower standards from her at all, I want them to give her the same, you can do it no matter what the situation you're in because you're strong, and you've got the brains, you've got the smarts.

When homeless children feel safe, supported and nurtured, that makes it possible for them to take academic, social, and emotional risks because they know there are people who really believe in them. This is a need of all children regardless of their family's situation.

Along with creating environments where homeless children and their families feel supported and where they believe that success is possible, flexibility to meet the needs of the children and their families is imperative. Homeless parents do not have much in the way of time and resources to offer their children and are focused on surviving on a daily basis, trying to suppress their feelings of shame because of their current situation. Fran points out:

> Some parents because of the trauma or the things that are happening in their lives really cannot be what their kids need them to be for them all the time. They don't understand the importance of structure and routine…If the school could provide that for them….

Providing support for the children and their families involves recognizing that the absence of essentials taken for granted by the majority of the population are daily struggles for homeless children and their families. Basic needs such as food, clothing, and transportation are obstacles for homeless families. Providing for these needs requires careful planning, forethought, and going the extra mile as a teacher. By not requiring parents to pay for additional supplies and money to complete classroom assignments or participate in school events, the school removes activity barriers for homeless children and allows them to fully participate in their education. Further, the realization that all families cannot attend traditional parent teacher conferences for various reasons, and allowing for alternatives for these meetings facilitates opportunities for parents of homeless children to fully participate in their child's education as well. Denial of these rights and opportunities creates a school,

which, as a public institution, fails a large number of children. Paul, a veteran elementary teacher comments:

> The children are just as eager and quick to learn as any other child who comes from a place…where they have everything. The biggest obstacles is us, and when I say us, I'm talking us as teachers…I don't believe their homelessness prevented them from doing things. I think we did.

Taking the time to understand the hopes, dreams, fears, and needs of homeless children and their families is essential. It is only with exploration that one may understand the complexity of a child and family's situation. Genevieve, in line with Paul's thoughts, continues:

> If you took the time to investigate and see, you might not always know, but if you took the time to sit down with him, then you might have understood the situation. Those kind of things are really important, to put those kind of support systems [in place], and find out what's going on in the home, and get the kids what they need at school.

When schools are cognizant of these struggles and make accommodations, encouraging the opportunity for family involvement, everyone succeeds.

A Place to Prosper and Grow

The Rainbow Center, the child care center run by Green Acres, is funded by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and is provided free of charge to area homeless families living in shelters or transitional housing. Two classrooms are offered, the Baby-Toddler room which cares for children ages two weeks to thirty-five months, and the preschool classroom caring for three- and four-year-old children. The Rainbow Center offers a safe place for homeless children to just be kids, providing for all of their basic and social-emotional needs. With low staff-to-children ratios, the staff are able to truly focus on

the needs of the children. In addition to the Head Start curriculum that the preschool uses, they also draw on a social-emotional empathy curriculum to help the children work through their feelings and learn how to express them. Following the philosophy of Green Acres, The Rainbow Center focuses on being a support system for the entire family, focusing on what the children and their parents need to feel safe and successful. Knowing that the parents are the principal influence in the children's lives, providing them with the knowledge and training to help their children succeed is critical. Genevieve states:

> This [The Rainbow Center] is for you and your kids and if we're not running with what supports you, there's not really a point in us being here. How do we educate you, your child, everybody as a whole, otherwise, we're failing if we're not doing that.

In addition, Genevieve stresses the importance of the training of her staff to sensitize them in their work with homeless families. Without the capacity to reflect on one's own judgments and biases about homeless families, the interactions with the families will not be successful. She explains:

> I think they [staff trainings] are very eye-opening and they make you very aware of different things, from the parent's point of view and understanding what someone going through that situation might endure or might feel or think and what they're perspective might be so you don't…it kind of helps you to take away that judgment of I don't understand why they [homeless parents] would do that.

> The environment that the center provides is a treasured haven for the families it serves. Knowing that their children are able to attend a child care center where they are safe and happy allows the parents to focus on the creation of stability for themselves and their

children. Additionally, there is no feeling of shame in not being able to provide transportation, meals, or appropriate clothing for the children as the center takes care of these, lessening the worries and struggles of the parents. Jamie, a homeless mother living in a shelter with her four-year-old daughter Katie, discusses how The Rainbow Center supports and nurtures both Katie and herself.

> I want someplace where she could go and play with other kids, but at the same time she could learn things that she needs to know so that she could go into kindergarten. And a place that she's going to be safe and feel comfortable with…the adults and get along with everybody…and that's like what I found here when we checked it out…If she feels like she doesn't have to worry so much then I'm going to be able to be a lot happier too. That's going to make the whole family happy in general. It makes life a little bit easier to bear right now. So it helps me and it helps her. It helps me so I can go out and find a job while she's here and it helps her because she can feel like she has a community and a structure in her life.

Robert is a homeless father living in transitional housing with his wife and three-year-old daughter Veronica. The stress of her family's instability has become apparent in Veronica's daily life. Added to the stresses and worries that Robert already possesses, the guilt over his daughter's worries is almost unbearable. He relishes the fact that The Rainbow Center provides her with a respite from her worries and allows her simply to be a carefree child.

> My child being de-stressed, de-stressing her, taking the whole load off of everybody, that in and of itself, you can't even put that in words. Plus having a staff that is caring, proactive, not only proactive, but planning, to me is even better provisions, you can't buy that…I look and I see stability, I see her having a routine, despite me

going through my job transitions…To have her come and be able to get out that

anxiety…in an environment that she can better understand, I couldn't measure it. It's

immeasurable but it's great because it's a helping hand.

With the support that Jamie and Robert are receiving as parents, the hopelessness they once

felt as a result of their homelessness, has diminished as they strive for stability for themselves

and their children.

Despite their current situation, Jamie and Robert exhibit overwhelming resilience as

they hope and plan for a brighter future. With the supports that are in place for themselves

and their children, they know that they will overcome the current setbacks they are

experiencing. More than anything, however, they want their children to have a better life than

they have had, free from so many struggles and so much pain. Jamie expresses her hopes for

her daughter:

I would like her to be able to grow up and go to school and have somebody like that

there, a teacher that cares not just about what the academics are, but how

emotionally…she's going to go through school…It would have been nice, with the

problems I had in high school if there had been a teacher there that…would make you

feel better inside…Everything that I'm doing is so that she can have a better life than

I ever had, so that she can get things out of life that she wants and the goals she wants

to meet. Eventually I want her to be able to have that.

Robert echoes the same resilience:

My philosophy in life is the same philosophy that I'm going to give Veronica, and

that's to strive for what you like and what you want…I want to make sure she grows

up comfortable enough to understand that anything can be aspired for, but aspire for

yourself. Sometimes you can't always have exactly what you want, but learn to be appreciative of what you've got.

Jamie and Robert's spirit of determination is not unique, as it is shared by many parents and families who experience homelessness. With support, compassion, and flexibility, schools can become landscapes that nurture homeless children and their families while providing a good, equal education for all.

Chapter 7: School Environments: Cruel and Condemning or Positive and Supportive

The stress and uncertainty associated with homelessness is a traumatic and life changing experience for children and their families. With their lives in constant upheaval, schools can be the one place in the fragile lives of homeless families that foster stability and support. Without opportunities for successful school experiences accompanied by nurturing relationships, a future free from the suffering of poverty and homelessness are beyond one's reach. While schools can be institutions that offer tremendous support, assisting families as they struggle to attain sustainability, they can also be settings of neglect, contempt, and condemnation. Sixteen years ago in her book *Lives on the Edge: Single Mothers and their Children in the Other America,* Polakow describes the third-grade classroom environment where Tim, a young homeless child, exists in the shadows of acceptance. Transferring to his fourth school after several episodes of homelessness with his young mother and baby sister, his is deemed a burden by his classroom teacher and suffers rejection and isolation imposed by his peers as they follow the lead of their teacher's treatment of Tim. Tim describes the hurt and anger he feels at the continual rejection by his peers, "They think 'cos I haven't got no home that I haven't got nothing inside of me - they won't play with me - they won't be a buddy when we go on trips either and no kids will be my friends…Also they all think I'm so dumb and I hate this school…" (1993, p. 145). Ironically, sixteen years later, school environments of rejection, exclusion, and condemnation still exist for many homeless children.

School Culture

The culture of the school profoundly impacts the educational experiences of homeless children and their families. The school culture includes the attitudes and interactions of

school personnel, the language of acceptance or rejection, the philosophy and leadership of the school administration, and the classroom environment that teachers create. As we have seen in the two schools described in this thesis, the culture of the school can be cruel and condemning or positive and supportive. Homeless children and their families can experience a culture of disrespect and rejection or respect and acceptance. Both of these settings directly influence the overall success homeless children and their family experience. As Dill, writing about personnel that serve to support homeless children, points out:

> Staff who work with students living in poverty have a unique and high-stakes opportunity because, for these students, succeeding academically, becoming a well-adjusted human being with a strong moral center, and possessing living-wage employment skills are not just nice things to accomplish: they are a matter of life and death. (2009, p. 10)

In the tenuous lives of homeless children, rejection by their teacher and peers is an acute risk factor that can affect and impede their development. Hungry for stability, compassion, and acceptance, many homeless children are received by hostile environments ready to discard them back to their marginalized existence within society. The rejection and exclusion imposed on homeless children often reflects the negative discourse of the media and policymakers, where homelessness and poverty are constructed as the consequence of poor personal decisions rather than systemic injustices (Polakow, 2007). As these societal feelings of rejection are thrust upon innocent children, they are often made to pay the ultimate sacrifice, a damaged sense of self. Writing about the pain experienced by homeless children, Garbarino (1995) argues that children thrive on acceptance, while rejection can serve to destroy their self-esteem. Garbarino further alludes to how rejected children view themselves as insignificant, surrounded by those who are enemies and wish them harm. Accepted children, on the other hand, learn to view themselves as significant individuals surrounded by those who are trustworthy and supportive, leading to a more promising adulthood.

The relationships that children have, not only with their families but with their peers and teachers, allow them to make conclusions about their self-worth. When they are engaged in supportive, nurturing relationships, they begin to believe in themselves and their abilities to succeed. However, Garbarino warns that, "Rejection corrodes and damages the sense of self-worth in much the way that cancer damages the body; it twists a child's outlook and makes every action painful. Thus rejected children and youth are in jeopardy" (1995, p. 155). As we look at the classroom world of eight-year-old Melissa (see Chapter Four), she is rejected by her teacher and her peers, rendering feelings of insecurity as she functions in the classroom. Throughout the day Melissa is found underneath her desk sucking her thumb, instead of producing assignments of which she is truly capable. Nine-year-old Tommy (see Chapter Five), on the other hand, exists within a classroom environment where he is accepted and valued by his teacher and peers. Despite his academic struggles, Tommy believes in himself and works hard, achieving academic, social, and emotional success.

Schools play a key role in the lives of their students. After the family, they are one of the most important developmental elements in the lives of young children. Acting as "significant units of intervention," schools can help homeless children and their families meet their basic, emotional, and academic needs as well as provide access to social support services within the community (Garbarino, Dubrow, Kostelny, & Pardo, 1992, p. 130). Creating an environment where children and their families feel safe, valued, and accepted is the first step in achieving relationships that foster successful experiences for homeless families. As Meier discusses in *The Power of their Ideas,* trust and safety are key issues in creating strong, supportive relationships between schools and families. "We wanted a school in which children would feel safe. Intellectual risk taking requires safety; children who are

suspicious of a school's agenda cannot work up to their potential. For the school to be safe, children needed to know that their parents trusted us" (1995, pp. 23-24). While essential components of successful relationships with homeless families include safety, sensitivity, compassion, and understanding (Klein et al., 1993), helping homeless children and their families experience school success, however, involves more than acts of kindness. Recognizing the role that the schools and their personnel play in advocating against social injustices for homeless children (Eddowes, 1993), establishing supportive, respectful relationships with families and providing necessary services are critical for successful school experiences for homeless children and their families.

In creating successful school experiences for homeless children and their families through comprehensive support services, every member of the school community must play a part (Stronge & Hudson, 1999; Rafferty, 1995; Reed-Victor & Pelco, 1999). Training and development for these varied school personnel needs to allow and encourage the opportunity for the exploration of social justice frameworks. The culture of the school must be scrutinized as it relates to homeless children and their families. Teachers need to reconstruct their teaching practices within this social justice framework. It is through this self-exploration process that school personnel can develop a more caring, sensitive understanding of the realities of homeless families (Powers-Costello & Swick, 2008). Viewing homeless children and their families from a place free of personal bias can empower successful experiences for all involved. It is through the lenses of change that schools and their personnel can attend to the unique needs of homeless families, realizing that academics will not occur before basic, social, and emotional needs are met. Schools must anticipate and recognize achievements and success for homeless children, fostering their individual

strengths and capabilities (Douglass, 1996; Stronge & Hudson, 1999). When schools care about their students, maintain a caring and positive learning environment, believe that they can make a difference, and hold high expectations for learning— homeless children and their families succeed (Popp, Grant, & Stronge, n.d.).

School success lays the important foundation for future life successes. With school failure, however, a child is set up for future economic difficulties and further exclusion from cultural and social experiences within society. Recognizing the importance of education and its promise of breaking out of the cycle of poverty and homelessness, parents long for a successful education for their children. Homelessness robs families not only of their basic human needs, but also of the social necessities of life. Adding to the penalties of homelessness, the educational outcomes for minorities and poor children reflect even more expansive inequalities, as minority and poor students are less likely to do as well in school as their peers. In addition, parents are likely to be excluded from participation in their children's education if they are poor, uneducated, or members of minority cultures (Noguera, 2003). Schools can help restore these basic physical and social needs for families through supportive, respectful relationships that foster family involvement in their children's education. When support is provided for homeless children and their families, social and intellectual development is enhanced, making life easier for the family and increasing opportunities to succeed and escape the "social toxicity" of their current life situation (Garbarino, 1982).

Families are the most important aspects of children's lives. While frequent communication between the home and the school is important in helping establish respectful, supportive relationships, more effort on the part of the school is necessary. The families must

know that in educating their children, their authority and values will not be damaged by the school (Meier, 1995). They must believe that the school will not blame them for their family's instability but, rather, understand the difficulties they are experiencing. Further, schools must take the time to learn about the children and the families they serve. It is with this knowledge that schools are able to make modifications to meet the needs of homeless children and their families. Developing partnerships with homeless families allows the school to reach the children, improving academic, social, and emotional development (Noguera, 2003). It is when homeless families feel respected, valued, and supported that they are willing to form partnerships in their children's education, helping all involved to experience success. As schools seek to form partnerships with homeless families, the interactions between the two must continually be evaluated for their effectiveness. The following questions emerge from the research as suggested best practice guidelines for schools seeking to develop genuine communication and social justice advocacy with homeless children and their families:

1) "Are we responsive to the stressors families are experiencing?"

2) "What steps have we taken to encourage ongoing communication with families?"

3) "Are we engaging families in setting up the agenda for our various communicative activities?"

4) "What specific steps have we taken to help homeless families feel invited and important in our school?"

5) "What are we doing to continually evaluate and improve our communication strategies?" (Swick & Bailey, 2004, p. 214).

A strong component of advocacy for homeless children and their families involves creating community and school partnerships to help meet their needs. In *City Schools and the American Dream,* Noguera discusses "working within the limits and possibilities of change" (2003, p. 148). While schools cannot stop the social inequities that create poverty and homelessness, they can work to improve the lives of those they serve, advocating for their most basic rights. Engaging in actions that can help and support homeless children and their families, alleviate their suffering, and promote their sustainability, are all achievable goals for schools to work towards (Noguera, 2003). Coordinating and collaborating with public and private organizations are ways for schools to effectively meet the needs of homeless children. Park Hill Elementary School (see Chapter Four) serves a largely economically disadvantaged population, yet failed to meet the educational needs of the Light-Powers children. Enlisting the help of outside agencies to support school success for their students would be beneficial for those and many other children. Providing supportive services such as an after-school homework club are entirely within Park Hill Elementary School's ability. Located within an area with many public universities and community colleges, Park Hill Elementary School could partner with the colleges as well as local homeless agencies to provide student mentors, which would foster academic success for the children and also provide needed support for the families. Community partnerships that provide needed support services for homeless families build civic capacity, allowing members of the community to focus on academic success for children within the community. Similar to social capital, civic capacity builds community connections, as well as resources, opportunities, and possibilities for homeless families (Noguera, 2003).

As Deborah Meier points out, "We [schools] don't create all the conditions that affect our students' lives…a world that places crushing burdens on far too many of our young people…[but we are] trying our best to make…[school] a place that at least temporarily makes life seem more interesting and more worth the effort" (1995, p. 49). Resiliency, or the capacity children have to overcome devastating life events emerging with positive outcomes, can be promoted through a school's advocacy for homeless children. Schools play a key role in fostering resilience and the ability to cope in the lives of homeless children and their families. In combating the risk factors associated with the reality of homelessness, schools can provide protective factors: a caring community, high expectations and mentoring, and opportunities for meaningful engagement and interest development. These protective factors foster resilience in children, protecting their health, facilitating developmental progress, supporting academic progress and success, and promoting emotional well-being. School personnel in their daily interactions with homeless children have opportunities to form supportive adult-child relationships that foster individualized resilience for children. It is through these relationships that the competence, caring, and confidence of children is developed and strengthened. Adult mentors for homeless children help them to learn to accept challenges, problem solve, and build relationships. By providing early interventions and specialized educational services that access resources from various community agencies, schools clearly contribute to the educational success and resiliency homeless children and their families experience (Reed-Victor, 2003).

Theory in Practice

The Benjamin Franklin Day Elementary School in Seattle is an example of a model full-service school that is built upon the fostering of strong relationships among the school personnel, parents, and the greater community. Principal Carole Williams reformed the once

segregated school with her vision of life transformation for the lives of the homeless and marginalized minority children it served. Reconstructing the philosophy of the school, Williams and her staff made an ethical commitment to help homeless and marginalized children through intensive support services. As Williams believed B. F. Day should be an agent of social reform, she articulated the school's guiding principles:

> As the principal of B. F. Day, I choose not to be concerned with the established societal standards and bureaucratic dictates of "doing things right." Rather, I choose to illuminate a compelling direction of "doing the right thing." I want teachers who are willing to go the 200 yards when it comes to letting children know we will never give up on them…I expect it. To those who say, "Schools are for educating children," I say, "We can educate children as to the meaning of love, trust, respect, and hope, or we can educate them as to the meaning of desperate cries that fall upon deaf ears and a disregard for human pain." (Quint, 1994, p. 33)

The principal's high expectations of her staff were met with acceptance as the staff were challenged to think about how their views about homeless children and their families shaped their interactions and inadequacies in meeting the unique needs of homeless children and their families. After visiting many of their students in homeless shelters, the teaching staff developed a greater sense of awareness, compassion, and sensitivity for the life-encompassing tragedy that homelessness can be for children and their families. In addition, the students at B. F. Day were educated about the trauma of homelessness, creating a sense of harmony and respect between homeless children and their housed peers.

The KOOL – IS (Kids Organized On Learning In School) program was implemented as a support system for students and their families to talk with administrators and staff about

their life and problems they had after 3 p.m. KOOL – IS involved volunteers from local businesses, churches, and community members to help with provisions of basic needs for impoverished families. With this interaction between the children, staff, families, and community, the school was better able to diagnose necessary services the children and their families required and provide those services for them. As Quint (1994) describes her study of B. F. Day she reflects:

> The recollections of small children and their overwhelmed mothers are powerfully engaging, as are the voices of warm and dedicated professionals who…connect with families in crisis. The professionals I encountered were not superhuman, nor were the students and parents extraordinary…submerged in poverty, social dislocation, and psychological defeat, these were ordinary children and their mothers, playing out a real-life drama of enduring adversity and crippling despair with little more…than their faith in their neighborhood school. But the volunteers…appeared to find extraordinary strength and ability in their genuine teamwork and moral commitment to a vision of how different the children's lives might be. (pp. 32-33)

The work of the dedicated staff, families, and community volunteers at B. F. Day serve as an excellent example of how one school can empower the lives of those it serves, making them forever changed in a positive way. This should and can be the school experience for all homeless children and their families.

Looking for a Brighter Tomorrow

My research has focused on trying to understand the workings of positive school communities that support school success for homeless children and their families. While the McKinney-Vento Act protects homeless children's access to public schools, this alone does not guarantee school success for homeless children and their families. Often met with the

insensitive attitudes of school personnel, homeless children struggle to make academic gains while enduring common stereotypes that demean and shame their families. The cruel and condemning effects of these insensitive attitudes can make school a feared place for many homeless children. However, when schools are caring and committed to equality and inclusion for all students, homeless children and their families experience successful school experiences. School can and should be a safe haven for homeless children.

Two distinct cultures were present in the two schools examined in this thesis. The ways in which Park Hill Elementary (see Chapter Four) and Earhart Elementary (see Chapter Five) facilitated meeting the needs of homeless children and their families were glaringly different. In the first school, Park Hill Elementary, children who were destitute and homeless were stigmatized, not valued, and their educational rights were violated. In the second school, Earhart Elementary, homeless children were nurtured and included in the life of the school, and their classroom experiences were dramatically different. It is important to remember that school personnel live within society and are not free from the material and ideological conditions that impact the ways in which individuals construct meaning about the world. These shared belief systems are often so deeply embedded within an individual's psyche that they are unrecognizable to the individual. Educators, however, have the possibility to be different, reflecting upon and working against belief systems that only serve the interests of some students, while excluding others— often those that are most vulnerable. Consequently, the power and impact of educational leaders that advocate for homeless children within the school needs to be further explored. Questions for further research point to broader social, political, and cultural factors that shape dominant attitudes about poverty and homelessness. The realities of race and social class appear to impact the fundamental

differences between these two schools. As I reflect upon my findings in this study, my inferences are speculative, with a full understanding that this opens the gateway for further study and further analysis of macro-social and policy issues.

The findings from this thesis point to the inadequate support structures that exist not only in Park Hill Elementary, but at many schools across the nation (Swick, 1999) and how these inadequacies fail to meet the academic, emotional, and physical needs of homeless children and fail to foster parental involvement. Improvements must be made within the schools in order to meet the challenges involved with the effective education of homeless children, as well as the supports that need to be provided to the family as a whole. Recommendations for the education and care of homeless children and their families relate to the entire school staff and emphasize the importance of educational leadership and commitment to social justice.

Recommendations include:

- Provision of formal in-service education by competent professionals and community organizations for teachers, administrators, and support staff to address awareness and sensitivity to the needs of homeless children and their families. Another vital aspect of this education includes school personnel becoming familiar with the social realities of the families they serve. To develop this awareness about the difficulties that homeless families experience, home visits, including visits to shelters and transitional housing, may be necessary.

- Recognition of an advocacy role for school personnel to ensure the educational rights of homeless children. Implementation of the advocacy role of school personnel for homeless children and their families should include assisting them to meet basic, academic, and social-emotional needs. This encompasses collaboration with both the school interdisciplinary team and community service organizations. It includes meeting the child's basic needs with a budget for school supplies, snacks, clothing, and transportation, and the creation of a resource center for children to complete homework assignments with a mentoring adult.

- Creation of a positive school and classroom environment in which school personnel role model respect and sensitivity to the children and their families. This positive environment includes caring attitudes of administration, teachers, school personnel, and students, which reflect the value of all students.

- Establishment of trusting, supportive relationships with homeless families geared at meeting their basic needs and fostering academic success for their children.

Facilitation of parental involvement through multiple levels of frequent communication including letters, phone calls, and transportation to conferences and school events. Alternate, accessible locations for conferences should be provided such as shelters, churches, or community centers.

- Assurance of the educational assessment of each child upon entry to the school district and the implementation of individual education plans for each child. This includes timely educational interventions to maximize each child's learning.

Summary

The findings of this study point to the lack of awareness of issues and concerns that affect homeless children and their families, the need to develop supportive relationships that encourage a genuine partnership between the family and schools, and the need for intervention services that are coordinated with other agencies. Recommendations serve to address these findings and stress the development of focused intervention and resources for local school districts and agencies as they work with homeless children and their families. While the specific study is grounded in local communities in southeast Michigan, the need for broader educational policies that address poverty and homelessness in this country emerge. As Rafferty pointed out almost fifteen years ago:

Children in the United States do not have a legal right to housing, to emergency shelter if they lose their home, to adequate nourishment and freedom from hunger, to preventative or curative health and mental health care, or to quality public education. This situation has devastating consequences on many children, and especially on homeless children. (1995, p. 55)

It is hoped that recognition of the acute needs of homeless children and their families will be an urgent policy priority of the new Obama administration.

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