Homelessness, Poverty, and Children’s Literacy Development

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Recent economic reports in the United States indicate that more than 550,000 families of young children are homeless (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2003) and 13 million children are living in poverty (Fass & Cauthen, 2007). Yet homelessness and the effects of poverty on families go beyond U.S. borders; they are global problems. More than 100 million families worldwide lack permanent housing or sufficient income to meet their basic needs (Capdevila, 2005).

Impact of Homelessness on Children

Multiple causes of homelessness include a lack of affordable housing, low wages, war, domestic violence, and natural disasters such as hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods.

Some homeless children are able to succeed in school despite the many challenges they face, but others are at risk for emotional (Morris & Butt, 2003), physical (Books, 2004), social (Fantuzzo & Periman, 2007), and behavioral problems (Books, 2004; Duffield, 2001; Knitzer & Lefkowitz, 2006; Zima, Wells, & Freeman, 1994) that can hinder their school attendance and performance. Absenteeism and high mobility constrain teacher and school connections and negatively affect students’ literacy experiences, understandings, and background knowledge (Noll & Watkins, 2003/2004).

Out-of-home placement experiences (i.e., homeless shelter, institutional care, foster care, placement with relatives, or group home care) often restrict children’s early literacy development and are associated with a higher number of behavioral problems and school suspensions (Fantuzzo & Periman, 2007; Rescorla, Parker, & Stolley, 1991).

Seventy-five percent of U.S. homeless children perform below grade level in reading (Rubin et al., 1996), and schools and teachers may not be prepared to teach these students, further hindering their literacy development and school achievement (Books, 2004). Polakow (1993), for example, described teachers’ negative beliefs (for example, “Heather has no positive potential,” p. 40) and children finding little understanding or affirmation in a school “landscape of condemnation” (p. 146).

Teacher Support of Homeless Children

Many teachers are succeeding in teaching children of poverty, such as the “star” teachers described by Haberman (1995, p. 3). Exemplary teaching includes the following elements.

Helping Students Find a Place in the Classroom

Polakow (1993, 2007) advocated taking time to understand students and their hardships. Perhaps students come to school upset by the chaos in their lives or worried about an ill parent and need a space in the classroom to decompress (by sitting alone at the start of the day and reading a favorite book or writing in a personal journal, for example). Teachers’ expressions and modeling of genuine caring (Noddings, 1992), coupled with compassion and safe classroom spaces, can change unengaged, disruptive children into active group participants. Also, teachers telling
children that they truly believe in their abilities can motivate students and create feelings of belonging in the classroom (Wheeler, 2008).

**Providing Access to Instructional Resources**

Providing materials that can go home and stay at home (without worries about loss) can help to build students’ connections to class activities and identities as readers and learners (Noll & Watkins, 2003/2004). As human resources, teachers can be involved in and support local events held in homeless shelters or community centers that engage parents and children in reading and writing activities (e.g., producing a newsletter, sharing books at home) or can offer tutoring.

**Promoting Parent and Family Involvement**

Schools and communities can work together to create academic programs that involve children and their families. The Brownstone School is an example of a successful, accelerated-learning, after-school program that serves homeless children in the Bronx, New York. It provides one-to-one tutoring, homework assistance, and theme-based educational activities to fast-track student learning (Nunez, 2000). The school also encourages parent involvement through learning contracts, participation in family literacy workshops, field trips, and staff support to attend parent–teacher conferences (Nunez, 2000). Inviting parents to create self-portraits that reflect their assets, needs, and successes or to keep reflective journals to share during conferences (Swick & Bailey, 2004) can support educational partnerships, build parent confidence and competence in helping their children, and foster ongoing communication.

**Encouraging Confidence and Literacy Participation**

Star teachers draw connections between reading and writing activities and the knowledge, talents, and experiences of their students (Haberman, 1995). Integrating creative arts (e.g., art, music, dance) with literature to promote the critical and analytical thinking skills of homeless children can be successfully achieved in regular school settings (Noll & Watkins, 2003/2004) and in summer intervention programs. Integrating reading and writing activities with reading theme-based text sets can enhance vocabulary development, comprehension, reasoning, and confidence (Sinatra, 2007).

**Help All Students Recognize Poverty and Homelessness as Global Problems Requiring Action**

Poverty is a key factor in homelessness. Teachers who engage students in reading and writing about how political and economic conditions contribute to poverty and homelessness worldwide and in their own community can raise awareness of social justice issues (Damico & Riddle, 2004; Lalas, 2007). Picture books such as *A Shelter in Our Car* (Gunning, 2004) and *Fly Away Home* (Bunting, 1991) might be used to tell poignant stories of young children and parents. Insights about the lives of homeless children, ages 10–14, living in shelters or experiencing life on the streets can be found in *No Place to Be: Voices of Homeless Children* (Berck, 1992).

Teachers can enable their students to take leadership roles in social justice through service projects that bring communities together, such as having local summits on poverty or communicating with local and national politicians (Mickelson, Cousins, & Williams, 2008). Mahiri (2006) found that students and teachers who developed multtexxtual digital projects on poverty and its connections to homelessness raised awareness and increased collaboration.

**Making a Difference for Homeless Children**

Fear is associated with homelessness—fears that homeless children bring to school daily, fears of other children that homelessness may affect their family, and teachers’ fears of being unsuccessful with their homeless students. The study of poverty issues and relevant literature can help develop empathy for homeless families and challenge associated stereotypes (Hunt, 2007). By joining with students in community-based projects that support children and families in poverty, teachers can form social and cultural connections between teaching and learning.
References


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