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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines and illuminates the social-emotional and educational experiences of children ages 5 to 18 residing in an urban, family emergency housing shelter located in the Southeastern region of the United States. Data were collected and triangulated through participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Findings revealed deep educational estrangement and adverse impacts on the social-emotional development of children and youth experiencing homelessness. The study suggests an urgent need to provide high-quality educational preparation to public school administrators and teachers working with children living in poverty and experiencing homelessness in the U.S. With persistent and rising child poverty, the author asserts that in addition to collectively working to dismantle systems of oppression that perpetuate poverty, building culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments in U.S. public schools must be a priority at national, state, and local levels. The author also shares critical research-to-practice recommendations for educators working in high-poverty schools.

Keywords

homelessness, poverty, education, social justice, youth, curriculum, development, teaching, learning, equity

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Layers of Estrangement: Social-Emotional and Educational Implications of Homelessness on K–12 Students

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Poverty is the worst form of violence—Mahatma Gandhi

While the United States is commonly identified as the world's wealthiest country, over 2.5 million children and youth are experiencing homelessness (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014). This marks the U.S. with one of the highest rates of child poverty despite its "developed nation" status. According to a recent *Global Wealth Report* by Allianz (Brandmeir, Grimm, Heise, & Holzhausen, 2015), the U.S. holds 41.6% of the total global wealth, with China following at 10.6%. Despite tremendous wealth, economic inequality in the U.S. is persistent, prevalent, and increasing at an alarming rate. U.S. Census data (2016) reveal that over 47 million people live in poverty in the U.S., including more than one in five children under the age of 18. Economically and racially segregated public schools throughout the U.S. make this daunting reality painfully clear. Further, the National Alliance to End Homelessness (2016) explains, "Youth homelessness presents a particular challenge for several reasons, including the fact that there is very little definitive data on this population" (p. 2). And while research on the physical effects of poverty on children and youth are well documented, research focused on the social-emotional and educational experiences of students living in poverty and experiencing homelessness is largely missing from existing literature.

With substantially increasing numbers of students living in extreme poverty and experiencing homelessness, it is crucial for 21st century educators to understand the social-emotional implications of homelessness.

This qualitative case study, which is part of a comprehensive ethnographic case study on homelessness and education, examines and illuminates the social-emotional and educational experiences of children ages 5 to 18 residing in an urban, family emergency housing shelter located in the Southeastern region of the United States.

NATIONAL SNAPSHOT OF HOMELESSNESS

Poverty and homelessness have existed in the United States since the late 18th century (Parker, 2015). The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act 42 U.S.C. 11434a(2), reauthorized by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 and officially signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015, defines homelessness as "individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." The *2015 Annual Homeless Assessment Report* presented to Congress indicates that in January 2015, an estimated 564,708 people in the U.S. were experiencing homelessness on a given night, of which 23% or an estimated one-quarter of homeless people in the U.S. were school-aged children (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2016). Families with children continue to be the fastest growing segment of the homeless population in the U.S. As alarming and heartbreaking as these numbers are, they are often underestimated.

One of the most difficult challenges in quantifying the harms of homelessness is the determination of the number of those experiencing homelessness in the U.S. Virtually all data either come from the U.S. Census

or non-governmental studies. At the most basic level, the counting of people involves researchers asking how many people are in the household. Obviously, problems arise with this method for determining the homeless population. The national and local homeless enumeration process underestimates the size of this population (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014). Additionally, many homeless families and individuals remain hidden during the enumeration process (Link et al., 1995; Sommer, 2001; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Education, 2016). It is also important to note that millions of children in the United States live on the brink of homelessness. According to the National Center for Children in Poverty (2016), 45% of children in the U.S. live in low-income families and more than 16 million children in the U.S. live in families with household incomes lower than the federal poverty level (below \$23,550 a year for a family of four).

Homelessness and poverty in the U.S. are inextricably linked as are poverty and race. There are many causes of homelessness in the U.S., including structural and individual factors, which often serve to reinforce each other as well as intersect or overlap. Causes of homelessness include but are not limited to deep poverty, lack of affordable housing, unemployment, mental illness, domestic violence, health problems, natural disasters, and substance abuse (Mickelson & Shankar-Brown, 2008; National Center for Family Homelessness, 2014; Yon & Shankar-Brown, 2009).

HOMELESSNESS AND EDUCATION

The U.S. public education system is faced with an often hidden and ignored segment of our society: children and youth experiencing homelessness. Millions of K–12 students sleep on the streets, under bridges, in cardboard boxes, in cars, in emergency housing shelters, in abandoned buildings, on stranger’s couches, in dilapidated motels, and in the homes of relatives or friends,

which the McKinney-Vento Act refers to as “doubled-up” or sharing housing with others due to loss of housing or economic hardship. Poverty is arguably the greatest threat to children and youth’s well-being. The devastatingly negative effects of poverty on brain development are well documented and often lead to numerous issues that contribute to physical, cognitive, social and emotional issues (Luby, 2015). The report, *America’s Youngest Outcasts* (National Center on Family Homelessness, 2014), describes the devastating impact of homelessness on children and youth in detail including “changes in brain architecture that can interfere with learning, emotional self-regulation, cognitive skills, and social relationships” (p. 7). Students with better health and living conditions naturally perform better on academic tests and daily school tasks (Kramer, Allen, & Gergen, 1995; Luby, 2015). Having to cope with numerous health problems and turbulent social issues puts students living in poverty and experiencing homelessness at an automatic disadvantage when it comes to educational achievement (Mickelson & Shankar-Brown, 2008; National Center for Children in Poverty, 2016).

Children experiencing homelessness face great challenges including educational, emotional, and health difficulties. Families in homeless situations are often split up in order to be sheltered. Living in a homeless shelter is extremely stressful. Research indicates that there is a lack of physical and emotional space in shelters (Dalton & Pakenham, 2002; Landow & Glenwick, 1999; Mickelson & Yon, 1995). To further complicate the picture, research demonstrates that homeless children are at a higher risk for suicide, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted diseases, and educational challenges (Children’s Defense Fund, 1998; Shinn, 2010; Vissing, 1996). *America’s Youngest Outcasts*, a report published by the National Center on Family Homelessness in 2014 states, “Children experiencing homelessness are among the most invisible and neglected individuals

in our nation. Despite their ever-growing number, homeless children have no voice and no constituency. Without a bed to call their own, they have lost safety, privacy, and the comforts of home, as well as friends, pets, possessions, reassuring routines, and community” (p. 10). The capriciousness and uncontrollability of a homeless child’s life often results in apathy, depression, and severe anxiety (Luby, 2015; National Center for Children in Poverty, 2016).

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Current literature examining the plight of homelessness on children and youth is limited and, unlike most prior research, the present study utilizes the voices of those most disenfranchised: homeless children and youth themselves. Additionally, in comparison to the majority of existing literature that focuses heavily on physical and cognitive implications, this qualitative study focuses on the social-emotional implications of homelessness on children as well as their educational experiences. With increasing numbers of students experiencing homelessness, there is a significant need to examine the social-emotional implications of homelessness and the lived educational experiences and viewpoints of children living in poverty and experiencing homelessness. Moreover, since the majority of the existing research on homeless children was conducted before the year 2000, this qualitative research study explores the social-emotional and educational experiences of homeless children at the beginning of the 21st century; in other words, post-No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

METHOD

By examining the lived experiences of school-age children and youth residing in an urban, family emergency housing shelter, this research study intends to illuminate the social-emotional and educational experiences of K–12 students experiencing homelessness. A qualitative methodology, case study research design, was

used to examine the lived social-emotional and educational experiences of 15 students, K–12, living in an urban emergency housing shelter in the Southeastern United States. A qualitative approach was selected due to its interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary nature, which involves the careful examination of social phenomena (Nelson, 1992). As a researcher, I appreciate that qualitative research involves the art of interpretation and seeks to make phenomena more complex and nuanced rather than simpler and well-defined (Huberman & Miles, 2005; Meloy, 2002; Newman, 1999; Paul, 2005; Schram, 2006).

Participants included K–12 students; ages ranged from 5 to 18 years old. The 15 participants included siblings and, thus, a total of eight families participated in the research study. The participants consisted of nine boys and six girls. Although the participants’ duration of residency at the homeless shelter varied, all of the participants in this study were residing in the Family Assistance Shelter while I conducted this case study, which took place over a 5-month period. The participants’ family configurations in this research study varied and included all of the following configurations: mother and father, mother and stepfather, single mother, and single father. However, a single mother with children was the most common family arrangement at the Family Assistance Shelter.

With the exception of a 5-year-old girl, all of the participants reported living in and out of homelessness for several years, and identified a variety of living arrangements including living doubled up with family or friends, as well as residing in homeless shelters, cars, motels, and on the street. All of the participants were U.S. citizens and identified English as their primary language. Fourteen of the participants identified themselves as Black or African American, and two of the participants identified themselves as having mixed ethnicity. One of the mixed or multiethnic participants identified as part Black, part Asian, and part White, and the

other participant identified as part Black and part Hispanic. Thirteen of the 15 participants were enrolled in public school, and two of the participants had dropped out of public school before entering the Family Assistance Shelter. Data were collected and triangulated over a 5-month period through participant observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis.

FINDINGS

This qualitative research study revealed how homelessness often results in deep educational estrangement and adversely impacts the social-emotional development of children and youth. One of the major themes that emerged during this study was the substantial social-emotional disconnect between participants and school. Data revealed that K–12 students living in an economically disadvantaged urban area in the Southeastern United States and experiencing homelessness are deeply disengaged at school and feel socially disconnected from their peers, teachers, and school administration. The study also showed that children and youth experiencing homelessness are more likely to recurrently receive lower grades, score below grade level on standardized tests, and become increasingly estranged from education. Data obtained from observations, interviews, and document analysis illustrated that all 15 of the homeless children had multiple, negative educational experiences. They frequently struggled to see the relevance and value of education, largely because of irrelevant curriculum and not feeling like valued members of their school or in their classrooms.

All of the participants, except a 5-year-old girl, used the word “boring” when describing school; many used the word “boring” multiple times in reference to discussing school. In fact, when asked the question, “If you had to pick one word to describe school what would it be?” Eleven of the participants independently selected the word “boring.” Two of the participants (ages 10

and 12) said “torture,” another participant (age 13) said “prison” and the final participant, five years old, said “fun.”

During interviews, I asked participants why they felt school was boring, and the responses I received were similar. Most of the participants described the curriculum, which they referred to as “schoolwork” or “assignments” or “worksheets,” as uninteresting and a waste of time, hence “boring.” In an interview with an 11-year-old boy, he explained that his teacher constantly gives worksheets and requires the class to “shut up.” He said, “I heard sixth is even more boring than fifth grade. More worksheets and them teachers yell a lot.” While talking about school he explained, “It is boring. Really boring, for real. I not kidding. I fall asleep all d-time and my friend, he’s got to wake me up.” Similarly, an 8-year-old boy described an overabundance of dull worksheets being utilized in school. He explained, “Anyone could be my teacher, cause, cause, all the teacher do is, she gives us boring worksheets to do every day. I hate school.” A 13-year-old girl in eighth grade, also reported being drowned by worksheets on uninteresting content, which she firmly explained was one of the main reasons she detested school. In her words, “Every class...they give us them stupid worksheets. We never get to learn about cool stuff and my science teacher, she is so f-ing slow, she talks in code...we gots no freaking idea what she be saying half the time.”

The only school subjects that some of the participants described as enjoyable were extracurricular subjects like gym, art, and music. Unfortunately, many of the secondary-level (middle and high school) participants reported being pulled from their extracurricular courses for remedial courses since they did poorly on the mandated district assessments and annual standardized state test. One of the middle school girls explained, “Art was the one thing I liked about school. Now I can’t go cause I got another math class instead. Boring. More stupid math n’ more tripp’n worksheets. I’m,

‘m, I am not kidding. I so hate school.” A boy 11 years of age and a girl 13 years of age also described being pulled out of extracurricular classes for remedial courses. Being pulled out of extracurricular classes frequently resulted in a host of unfavorable emotions, specifically making them feel irritated, sad, and resentful. One student in middle school explained that the worst part of being pulled out of a “fun” class and put in a remedial class is that “the dumb people classes, that’s what we call-em at school, it like being in jail. They make you sit still and quiet and they ask us to do work from the book. I don’t even understand it so I just sit there the whole time bored. I, um, um, can’t wait until I older cuz I gonna leave.” The data revealed that disengaging curriculum and unresponsive pedagogy not only perpetuate a disconnect between children experiencing homelessness and their education, but also encourage feelings/thoughts associated with dropping out of school.

Two of the participants, 17 and 18 years of age, had dropped out of school. Speaking to these two participants about education was especially insightful in understanding the extent of detachment children and youth living in poverty and experiencing homelessness felt from education, not only to the curriculum but also to peers, teachers, and school administration. Both of these participants had spent their life living in extreme poverty, and regularly experienced long bouts of homelessness. BB Fantasia, 17 years of age, told me that she never felt comfortable in school. “I was picked on, kids say smack bout me in school. Them always talked shit to me and try to start fights... the teachers never care. My whole damn life teachers act like I some kinda fucking criminal.” When I inquired into why she believed students teased and bullied her in school, BB Fantasia replied in a bitter tone, “Cause I never had, uh, d-right clothes, I guess, and my hair be a hot mess since ma, um, never had money to get it washed...so they would call me things like

‘street girl,’ or, uh, ‘grubby.’ I, um, end up fighting them kids, and god damn principals always yell at me...Punish me even though them the ones starting shit...I happy to be gone. That place was, was living hell. Hell.” In another interview, during a different discussion about school, BB Fantasia cynically laughed and declared, “I am telling ya straight up school ain’t never, NEVER been for me. All that white talk and testing.” BB Fantasia occasionally told me she thought about getting her General Equivalency Diploma or General Educational Diploma (G.E.D.). During my study, I gathered a stack of information and resources on receiving a G.E.D., including free G.E.D. classes at a local community college, and shared them with BB Fantasia. Near the end of the study, BB Fantasia and her father had been asked to leave the Family Assistance Shelter for confidential reasons. I saw BB Fantasia twice after she left the shelter. She had yet to pursue working towards her G.E.D. and told me that she decided to put it off for a few years because “it just not be the right time in [her] life.”

Similarly, B.C., a Black 18-year-old male, had dropped out of high school at the age of 17. In an interview, he described feeling detached from his peers, teachers and the administration, as well as disengaged from the curriculum. He told me that he detested school so much that he would have dropped out in middle school had it been permissible or legal. He explained:

I hated school. It was boring. All them worksheets...Like we ain’t got nothin’ better to do. (laugh) I, umm, I got in trouble a lot, too...For stupid shit sometimes. Like, umm, like forgetting my pencils, losing my books, not, um, having, um, um, homework, back-talking well the teachers think I back-talking...I got in fights, too. Dang, oh man, I had a ton of fights in school...Cuz of all the punks at school. If someone talks smack about me or insult me to my face, or my family, I gonna react, ya know what I saying.

When I asked B.C. to elaborate on the “smack” he was referring to, he sighed and shut his eyes. After a few deep breaths, he said:

Everything stupid, nasty-mean thang you can imagine...One time this boy found out that we lived in a motel and he started asking me stuff like, ‘How do you like sleeping with cockroaches?’ Oh, and one time he told me he heard my family not afford to shop at K-mart or some shit. Stupid stuff like that. One day I just popped him in the face. Just ‘BAM!’...His nose was bleeding and d-ugly punk start crying. (laugh) It was great. Teachers started fussing at me...The principal got me suspended, which was fine. Fine by me cause shoot, I hate that place anyway...of course, he [the other student] got nothin’ at all. Nothing. I tried to tell them how he always talking smack to me but they not listen or givva damn. Them just told me to be quiet, ‘shut up.’

In addition to finding the curriculum boring and meaningless and the pedagogy weak, B.C. was recurrently teased and humiliated by fellow students. Although, B.C. had several issues with school, what appeared to bother B.C. the most about his educational experience was the inequitable treatment he received by his teachers and school administration. His voice filled with both anger and sorrow as he explained, “The teachers and principals be so unfair and mean. Them never cared about me, never. That be the worst part, umm, the part I hate most about fucking school.” He, like many of the students in this study, felt disrespected by his peers and misunderstood by his teachers in school. The homeless children and youth in my research study repeatedly described the school culture as boring and hostile. Even the younger participants felt disengaged in school. During an interview, a 6-year-old boy explained, “Some kids try to bully me. My brother says to kick em in the balls but one time I did and gots me in trouble so now I just act mean in school so them, them leave me alone.” In another interview, the

same participant said, “My teacher hate me. I don’t [know] why she do, but she do. She hate me bad.” An 8-year-old boy also felt that his teachers at school disliked him. He described feeling picked on by both students and teachers. In his words, “Even when I nice to them, the kids, the kids, they them kids pick on me and [my teacher] don’t like me for sure, not even a little bit.”

Crystal, 14 years old, expressed feeling isolated in school on many different occasions. As an adolescent, Crystal appeared to struggle with feelings of inadequacy and loneliness even more than the younger participants in my research study. During the middle of one of our interviews, she began crying. She said, “The teachers be yelling at me for everything...I try to do good on my work but getting D’s and F’s. I feel, feel bad. I not doing good in school. Afraid I gonna drop out and end up like ma cleaning toilets...the kids are mean to me. I just don’t fit in. Ma told me I probably switch’n school again soon anyhow but she, um, um, she, um, jus’ don’t get it...It don’t matter how many times I’s switching school. I never fit...It make me feel bad.” Feeling inadequate and isolated in school, as seen in Crystal’s case, bothered many of the participants and noticeably added to their educational estrangement. As educators, we must be cognizant of the adverse social-emotional implications of homelessness and the educational challenges faced by students living in extreme poverty.

When I asked each of the 15 participants if they had plans for attending college in the future or were considering attaining some form of advanced certification or degree beyond high school, only two of the homeless children said “yes.” The other 13 students reported having no interest in attending college and a few of the participants, including adolescents, mentioned that they had never thought about college before. When I asked B.C. about his future plans and college, he started laughing. He gently punched my shoulder and responded, “You are

funny. Me, in college. Now that is f-ing hilarious.” B.C. snickered and reminded me that he had not even completed high school. Interestingly, B.C. admitted that he thought he would enjoy studying religion or music in college; however, he consequently explained, “But I can’t afford no college and I sure as hell not gonna get no scholarship...even if I gots a scholarship, I’d fail out cause I, um, seriously I, uh (laughing), el sucko at schoolo.” For the majority of the participants, college was not part of their future vision or plans. In fact, even entertaining the idea of college was frequently ruled out due to their negative educational experiences and the social-emotional disconnect they felt to school.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Various social-emotional implications of homelessness often result in an increased disconnect between students experiencing homelessness and their feelings/perceptions toward education. Several of the participants cringed and trembled as they spoke about school and repeatedly declared their deep resentment and hatred toward school. Disengagement with the curriculum and feelings of isolation from their peers, teachers, and administrators as well as exclusive school culture, was evident among all 15 of the children and youth living in the emergency housing shelter. Further, the intersectionality of class and race, especially as evident in this study, must be emphasized; research documents that public schools generally operate from white, middle-class norms (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Nieto, 2013) and I was often reminded of this reality when speaking with the children. Analysis of data unremittingly reinforced that K–12 students living in poverty and experiencing homelessness did not see the purpose of or value in school. Additionally, many of the participants expressed feeling misunderstood by their teachers. Feelings of being misunderstood and devalued by teachers further estranged their relationship with teachers and education as a whole.

This qualitative study exposed a relationship between homelessness and educational estrangement in the United States that clearly has grave social-emotional implications for our children and youth. In spite of the numerous challenges faced by children and youth living in poverty and experiencing homelessness, this study also revealed the resilience of students in homelessness. Ideally, poverty and homelessness in the U.S. and around the globe would be eradicated. Ideally, every child would have a safe place to sleep, healthy food to eat, access to high quality education, and responsive support systems. However, this is not the case for millions of children and youth experiencing homelessness, and child poverty in the U.S. is expected to increase. In addition to radical macro changes focused on dismantling systems of oppression and eradicating poverty, this qualitative study suggests an urgent need for high-quality educational preparation for U.S. public school administrators and teachers working in high poverty schools. Building culturally responsive and inclusive learning environments in U.S. public schools must be a priority at national, state, and local levels. Curriculum and instruction needs to reaffirm the value of education while meeting the diverse and relevant needs of students living in poverty and experiencing homelessness. In particular, results from this research study demonstrate the need for better academic and social support services for children living in poverty and experiencing homelessness, beginning with increasing the awareness and competence of educators in regard to the multifaceted effects of poverty and homelessness. The author shares critical research-to-practice recommendations for educators working in high-poverty schools in the Appendix.

A holistic approach to intervention that strives to improve public education for children and youth experiencing homelessness in the United States is recommended, especially in an effort to prevent widespread feelings of

detachment from education. In B.C.'s words, "Homelessness is tougher than tough, but what really hurts is feeling that teachers don't understand and the community don't seem to care enough about children to work for real change." We, in a collective sense, have a civic responsibility to increase awareness on the complexities of homelessness. We need to work together for real and sustainable social change. Let us actively work to dismantle oppressive systems and transform the painful realities endured by millions of students living in poverty and experiencing homelessness. Imperative to healing and transformation is a better understanding of the social-emotional implications of homelessness. We must advocate for children living in poverty and provide students experiencing homelessness with vigorous support services to help mitigate the adverse effects of poverty and combat pressing educational barriers. We must continually listen to the voices of our diverse children and youth and commit ourselves to promoting social justice. All of our children and youth deserve to have access and opportunity to high quality education—an education that ultimately supports them in pursuing their dreams and making our world a better place.

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Appendix

Research to Practice: Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness

The fact that over 2.5 million children and youth are homeless in the U.S. is reprehensible and is a clear call for collective action. We must mobilize and advocate for social change that includes dismantling systems of oppression that cause and perpetuate homelessness in the U.S. (as well as around the globe), including the lack of safe and affordable housing, the need for better mental health services, limited funding for trauma-informed care, persistent educational inequities, and the need for domestic violence and sexual assault prevention. While the prevalence and impacts of child poverty and homelessness are tremendously daunting, educators can and must take steps to mitigate the harmful effects of homelessness on students. Here are three critical recommendations for educators in high poverty schools and/or working with K–12 students living in poverty and experiencing homelessness.

Identify and Address Diverse Needs

Recognize basic needs and help ensure the diverse needs of students experiencing homelessness are being addressed. Maslow (1943) stated that all individuals have basic and growth needs. Maslow's expanded *Hierarchy of Needs Model* (McLeod, 2016), a pyramid of hierarchical levels, includes biological or physiological needs, safety needs, love and belongingness needs, esteem needs, cognitive needs, aesthetic needs, self-actualization needs, and transcendence needs. At the foundation of this model are biological and physiological needs such as air, sleep, food, drink, and shelter. For students experiencing homelessness, survival needs, including shelter and food, become daily and dire struggles; this stress is often compounded by the emotional and psychological burdens of being homeless. Make healthy snacks, extra school supplies, and even basic hygiene products (e.g., toothbrush and toothpaste, deodorant, etc.) available and easily accessible in your school/classroom. Build relationships with students and take time to identify their diverse set of needs.

Establish a Safe and Nurturing Learning Environment

For children and youth experiencing homelessness, school is often the only refuge from the vicious realities of extreme poverty. Students living in deep poverty face unparalleled challenges and being homeless magnifies and adds to those challenges. The impact of homelessness, particularly frequent dislocation, is traumatic. Homeless students are confronted with significant fear, uncertainty, and isolation. It is critical that students feel safe and loved at school. Creating a supportive school/classroom atmosphere is essential for promoting students' social, emotional, cognitive-intellectual, and physical development. Homeless students are generally highly mobile, and this adds to the social alienation that already accompanies homelessness. Even if students only remain part of a school community for a brief period of time, we must make them feel included and let them know that they are valued members of the community/school/classroom. As Maya Angelou said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." It is crucial to connect with students, to make them feel safe, and to let them know they are cherished.

Promote Literacy and the Arts

Poverty tremendously limits opportunity in many senses. Many children and youth living in poverty and experiencing homelessness face a variety of difficult challenges, including illiteracy or low literacy skills. Research demonstrates that homeless students are far behind their peers in reading and writing, often due in part to residential instability, lack of literacy modeling, and limited access to literacy materials. In addition to such a massive educational impediment, homeless students generally face mental and emotional health issues. Literacy and the arts can help close the opportunity gap. However, a careful examination of schools in the U.S. reflects class privilege, as students attending economically advantaged schools are often presented with authentic literacy opportunities and learning in places where the arts are valued, offered, and pursued; while high poverty schools often use narrow curriculum with limited opportunities for authentic literacy, bombard students with testing (and in an ghastly cycle, teaching to the test), and neglect the arts due to slashed music, theater, and/or art programs. Focusing on literacy across content areas and integrating the arts is shown to increase learning engagement, foster connection and collaboration, and improve academic performance among students, particularly for children living in poverty. Additionally, in addition to educational advantages and widening opportunities, literacy and the arts can promote creative self-expression, psychological healing, resiliency, self-esteem, and social-emotional growth. It can decrease traumatic stress and provide students, particularly children and youth experiencing homelessness, “opportunities to share experiences in an empathic environment through symbolically expressing emotions in a concrete way” (Smilan, 2009, p. 381). We, as educators committed to supporting children and youth experiencing homelessness, must advocate for and actively integrate literacy and the arts in the curriculum.